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ARGOSY

JUNE

15¢

OPIUM CLIPPER

A NOVELETTE OF THE PERILOUS 50's

by

E. HOFFMANN PRICE

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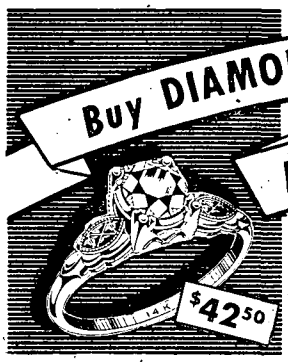

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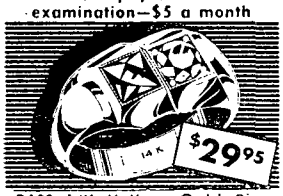

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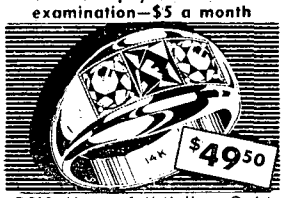

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Rings and diamonds enlarged to show detail

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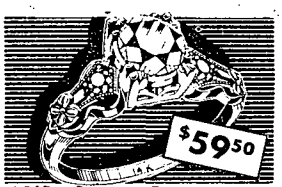
Sales Mgr.



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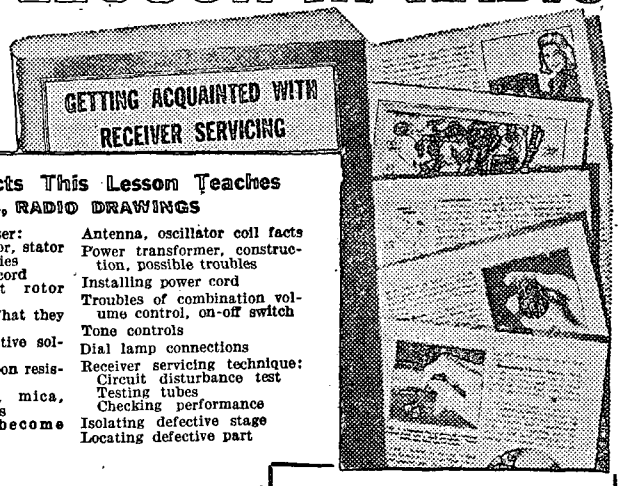
FREE LESSON IN RADIO



Here Is a Partial List of Subjects This Lesson Teaches

WITH 31 PHOTOS, SKETCHES, RADIO DRAWINGS

How superheterodyne receivers work
How to remove tubes, tube shields
Three reasons why Radio tubes fail
Electrodynamic loudspeaker:
- How it works
- Replacing damaged cone
- Recentering voice coil
- Remedies for open field coil

Output transformer construction, repair
Gang tuning condenser:
- Construction of rotor, stator
- How capacity varies
- Restringing dial cord
- Straightening bent rotor plates

I.F. transformers—What they do, repair hints
How to locate defective soldered joints
- Inside story of carbon resistors

Paper, electrolytic, mica, trimmer condensers
How condensers become shorted, leaky
Antenna, oscillator coil facts
Power transformer, construction, possible troubles
Installing power cord
Troubles of combination volume control, on-off switch
Tone controls
Dial lamp connections
Receiver servicing technique:
- Circuit disturbance test
- Testing tubes
- Checking performance

Isolating defective stage
Locating defective part

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Established 28 Years

See For Yourself How I Train You at Home to BE A RADIO TECHNICIAN

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More Radio Technicians and Operators Now Make $50 a Week Than Ever Before

There's a big shortage of capable Radio Technicians and Operators because so many have joined the Army and Navy. Fixing Radios pays better now than for years. With new Radios out of production, fixing old sets, which were formerly traded in, adds greatly to the normal number of servicing jobs.

Broadcasting Stations, Aviation and Police Radio, Ship Radio and other communications branches are scrambling for Operators and Technicians to replace men who are leaving. You may never see a time again when it will be so easy to get started in this fascinating field. The Government, too, needs hundreds of competent civilian and enlisted Radio men and women. Radio factories, with huge war orders to fill, have been advertising for trained personnel. And think of the NEW jobs Television, Frequency Modulation, and Electronics will open after the war! This is the sort of opportunity you shouldn't pass up.

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There's probably an opportunity right in your neighborhood to make money in spare time fixing Radios. I'll give you the training that has started hundreds of N.R.I. students making $5, $10 a week extra within a few months after enrolling. The N.R.I. Course isn't something just prepared to take advantage of the present market for technical books and courses. It has been tried, tested, developed, perfected during the 28 years we have been teaching Radio.

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MAIL COUPON NOW for FREE Sample Lesson and 64-page illustrated book. See the many fascinating jobs Radio offers and how YOU can train at home. If you want to *jump your pay—mail Coupon* in an envelope or paste on a penny postal!—J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 3FS9, National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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"I repaired some Radio sets when I was on my tenth lesson. I really don't see how you can give so much for such a small amount of money. I made $600 in a year and a half, and I have made an average of $10 a week — just spare time." JOHN JERRY, 1337 Kalamath St., Denver, Colo.

RADIO SERVICE MANAGER OF 4 STORES

"I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N.R.I. I am now Radio Service Manager for M—— Furniture Co. for their 4 stores." JAMES E. RYAN, 119 Pebble Court, Fall River, Mass.

LIEUTENANT IN U.S. ARMY SIGNAL CORPS

"I cannot divulge any information as to my type of work, but I can say that N.R.I. training is certainly coming in mighty handy these days." (Name and address omitted for military reasons.)

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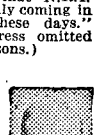

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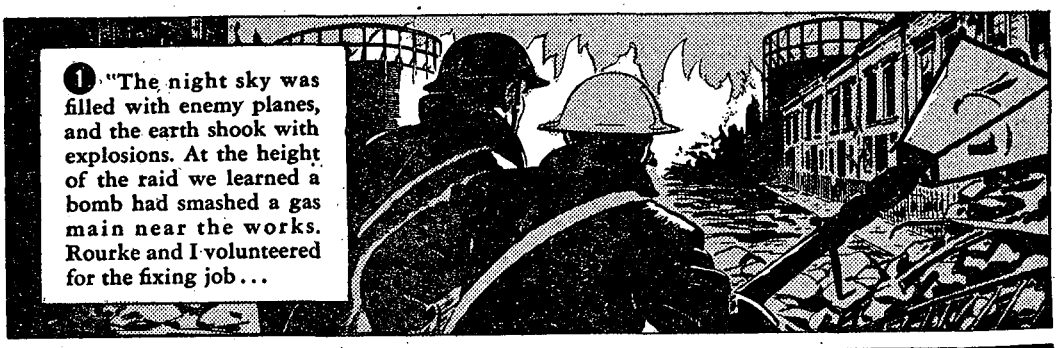
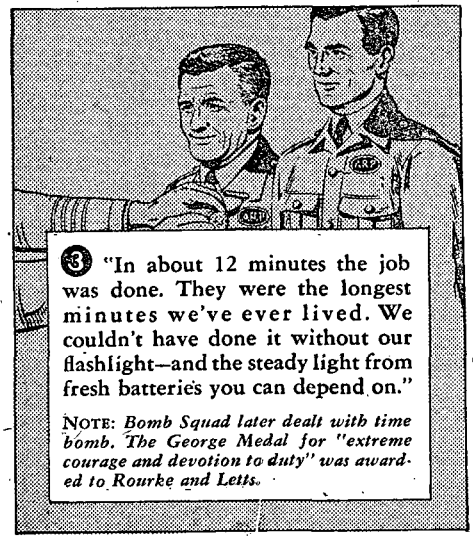
INCHES FROM DEATH, THEY WORKED LIKE FIENDS!

A true story of the blitz in England as told to a War Correspondent by Arthur Letts and Frederick Rourke, gas repair men for the Thames Estuary District, Greater London.



1 "The night sky was filled with enemy planes, and the earth shook with explosions. At the height of the raid we learned a bomb had smashed a gas main near the works. Rourke and I volunteered for the fixing job...

2 "We found it," continued Rourke. "A big delayed action bomb sitting on a severed pipe in the middle of a three-foot crater. We set to work. Letts held the flashlight, taking care to shield it so the Nazis couldn't see it, while I blocked the broken pipe with clay.



3 "In about 12 minutes the job was done. They were the longest minutes we've ever lived. We couldn't have done it without our flashlight—and the steady light from fresh batteries you can depend on."

NOTE: *Bomb Squad later dealt with time bomb. The George Medal for "extreme courage and devotion to duty" was awarded to Rourke and Letts.*

OCD approved flashlight regulations stipulate careful shielding of the light from a flashlight during a blackout, as Arthur Letts did. Likewise wartime economy demands strict conservation of both flashlights and batteries:

Use your flashlight sparingly—save batteries! Don't buy a new flashlight unless the old one is beyond repair! Don't hoard flashlight batteries! Don't put in a more powerful bulb than your flashlight calls for—it simply wastes power!

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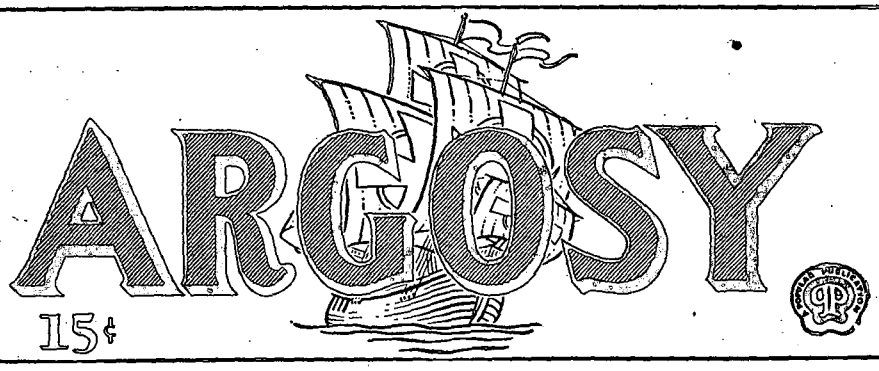
OLDEST AND BEST ALL-FICTION MAGAZINE



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Cover Artist
Malvin Singer

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Editor
Rogers Terrill

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ARGONOTES

WHATEVER else may be said of your typical ARGOSY reader, no one can deny that he takes the interests of his magazine to heart. He's not only a loyal, enthusiastic follower, but a friendly critic whose corrective suggestions are often as greatly appreciated as his praise.

Tom Roan's letter in last month's *Argonotes*—asking for a "bigger and better" ARGOSY, and telling us why he considers the magazine's present size and lay-out inadequate for the job it has to do—is a case in point. In this morning's mail there's a letter from another reader who expresses the fear that the day of the great all-fiction magazine is past. And he implies, as did Mr. Roan, that the lack of space which limits story length and variety is chiefly at fault.

Formerly an enthusiastic serial fan who "begged for more and longer continued stories," this reader now feels that serials should be eliminated and that a book-length novel, complete in each issue, should be substituted. (Mr. Roan, incidentally, suggested a book-length novel complete in each issue, but he also recommended an increase in size to allow three serials and more instead of fewer shorts.)

Ralph F. Bassett, on the other hand, is a reader who apparently has no fault to find with the magazine. He writes:

> I have now had the pleasure of reading several copies of ARGOSY under the new management, and would like to take this opportunity to congratulate you on giving old ARGOSY readers a book similar to the one they enjoyed reading in the old days.
>
> Returning ARGOSY to the weekly field or even publishing it on a semi-monthly basis is out for the duration, I presume, but a fellow can dream, can't he? In the meantime, we feel that you are definitely steering the good ship ARGOSY into mighty smooth water. Probably "Looking Ahead" will become less difficult when the lights go on again all over the world.

Chad Oliver, whose request for a fantastic serial appeared in March *Argonotes*, has sent us this friendly follow-up note:

> In your comment on my letter in the March issue, you kindly invited me to express my opinion of the forthcoming serial by C. L. Moore and Henry Kuttner. So here it is. If the remaining three parts are one-half as fine as the opening installment, ARGOSY will have again been responsible for a really fine story in the realm of fantastic literature. It is one of the best I have ever read—and I've read quite a few. . . .
>
> By the way, I seem to recall from some dark corner of my mind that Miss Moore and Henry Kuttner are man and wife. Perhaps this would make an interesting side comment in *Argonotes*. . . .

You're right, Mr. Oliver. C. L. Moore and Henry Kuttner are Mr. and Mrs. Kuttner in private life.

G. H. Laird, who's been reading ARGOSY since Volume 1, Number 1, has written us another long and interesting letter. We quote:

> I believe now that ARGOSY will once more enjoy the popularity and leadership it did in the past. . . . Concerning the number of stories, why not reach a happy medium with two novelettes, five short stories and three serials? By all means not less than three serials!
>
> Again may I make the plea not to stereotype ARGOSY stories. Give us something except adventure. We all love adventure, but ARGOSY is not and never has been a purely adventure magazine. . . . And now for the pay-off: When do we get a weekly????? Put it to a vote! One month is entirely too long to wait for the favorite. . . . We wait that long for *American, Cosmo* and *Red Book*, and never quiver—but an ARGOSY lover can't maintain sanity and wait a month for ARGOSY!

It seems that everyone wants ARGOSY either published more often or made into a bigger magazine that can handle more and longer stories. Since more frequent publication is probably impossible for the duration, we're giving serious consideration to the possibility of launching a bigger and better ARGOSY that would include the "complete nobel," the ten or a dozen short stories, the novelettes and—lastly—the "couple or three serials" suggested in Mr. Roan's letter of last month.

Do you readers of ARGOSY feel that such a magazine would be worth the higher selling price that these changes would inevitably necessitate?

THE EDITOR

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MEN! Whether You are 16 or up to 50

Serve Your Country Best... in a

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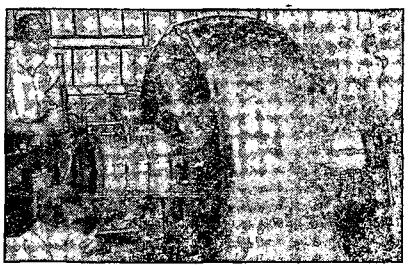

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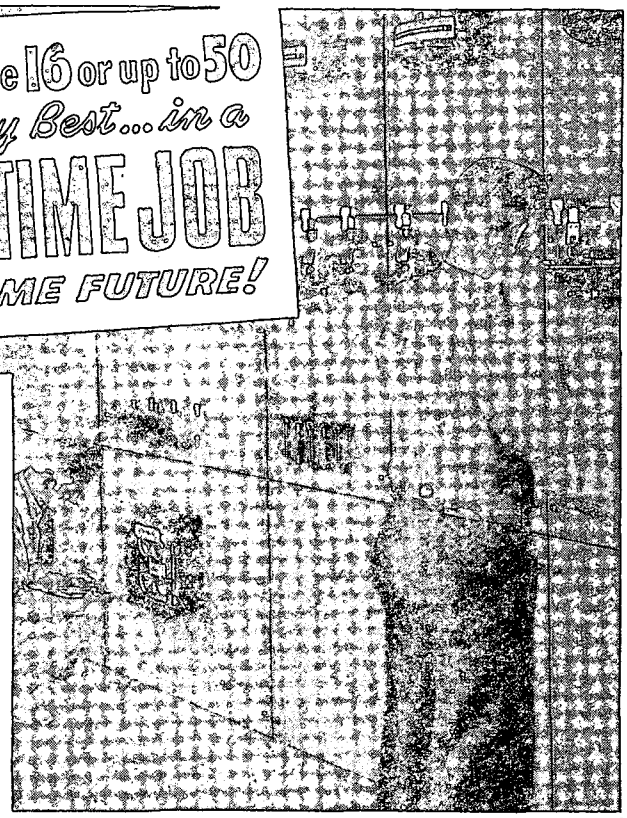

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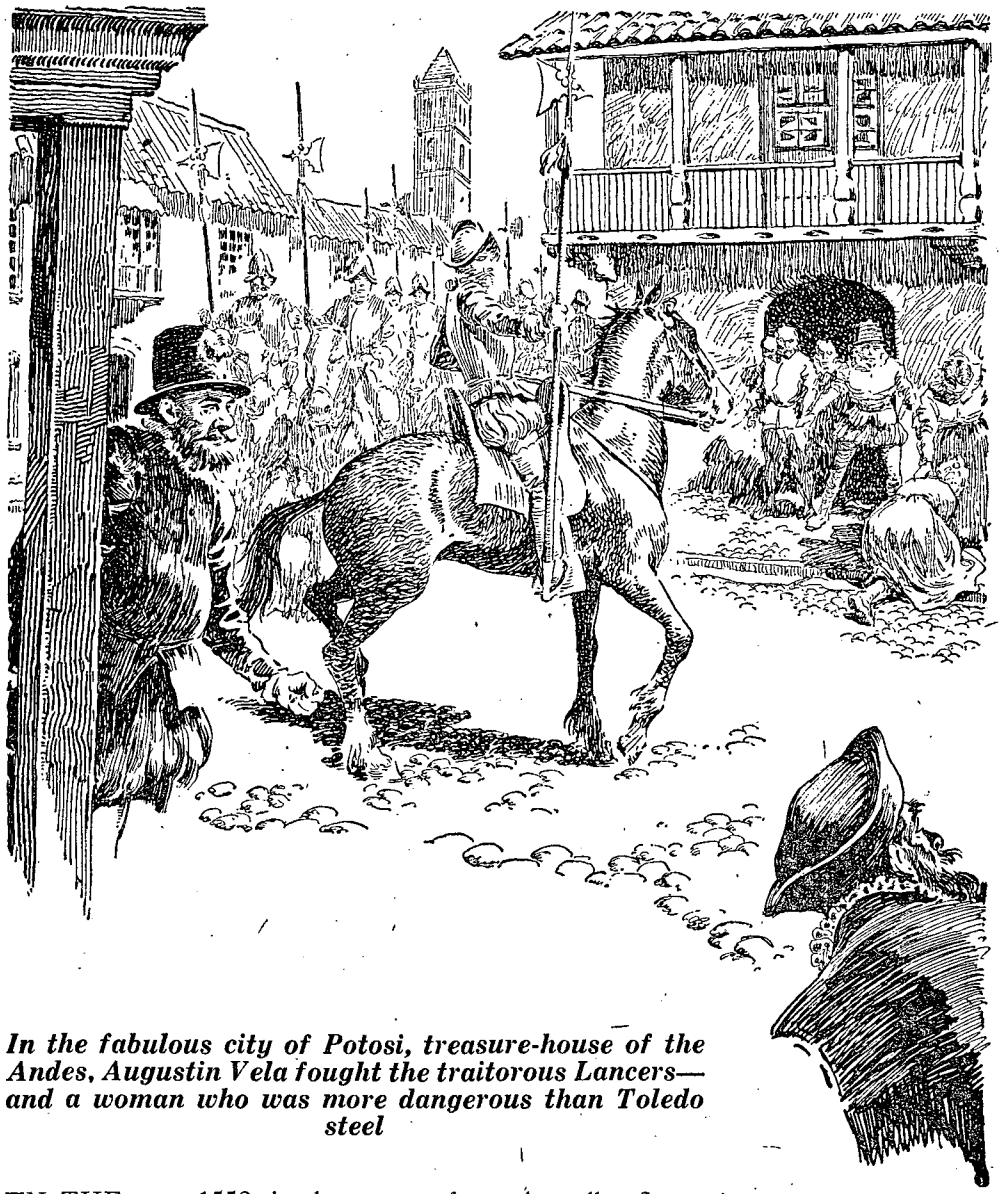
CITY OF SILVER



In the fabulous city of Potosi, treasure-house of the Andes, Augustin Vela fought the traitorous Lancers—and a woman who was more dangerous than Toledo steel

IN THE year 1552, in the center of a frigid valley in the Bolivian Andes fourteen thousand feet above the warm sea, the greatest city of the Spanish new world lay sprawled. Back of the city, a two-thousand-foot volcanic cone rose from the valley floor. And on the sides of this hill a hundred and twenty thousand people labored with the carelessness of plenty, pocking the slopes with many scars of torn earth. These scars were the fabulous mines of Potosi, the well-spring of the

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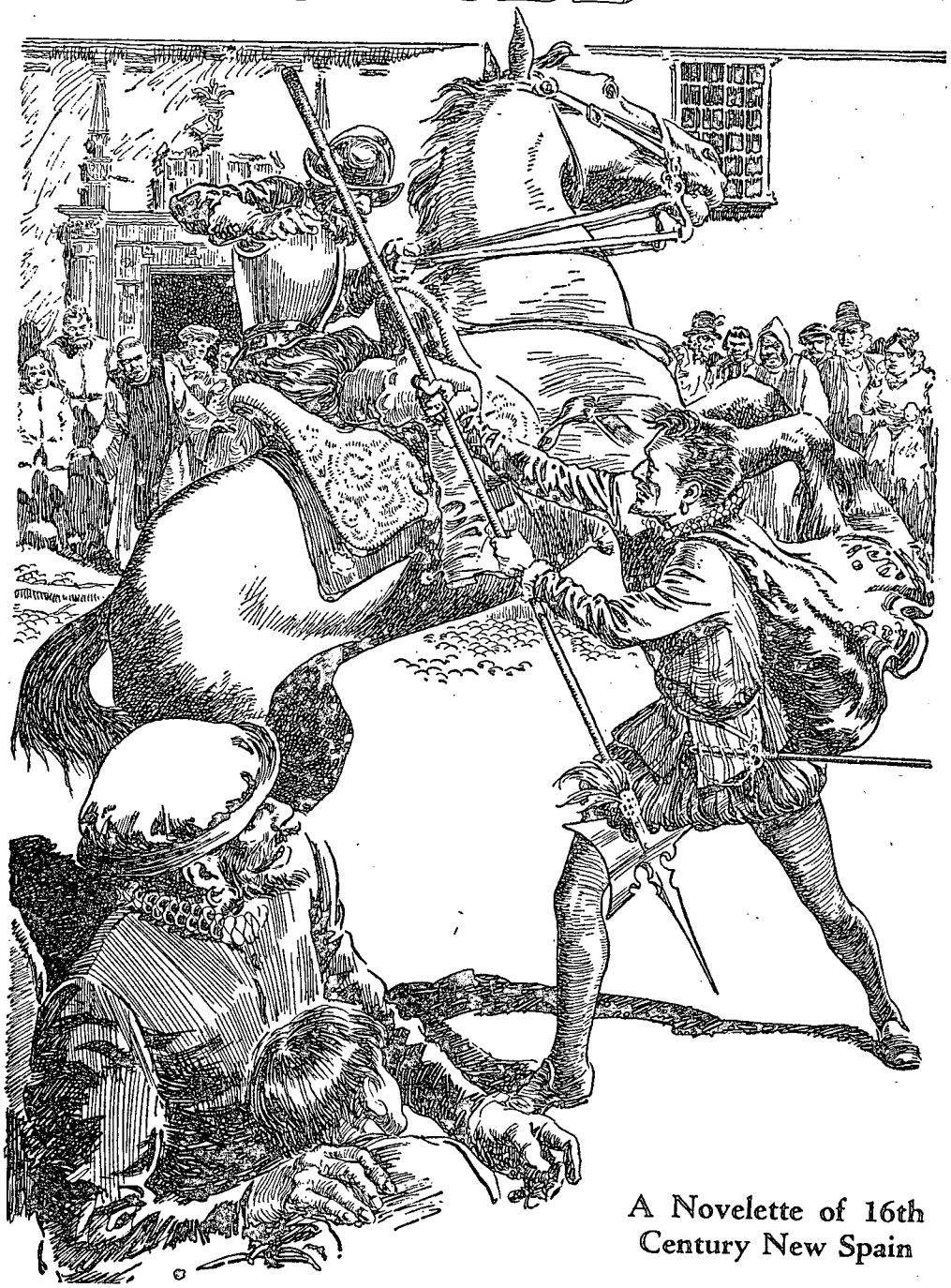
AND STEEL

By TOM W. BLACKBURN



A Novelette of 16th Century New Spain

Illustrated by Sterne Stevens

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endless stream of silver treasure which was making the King of Spain the mightiest monarch on the face of the earth. Here were millionaires and slaves, debauchery and glory. Here were the great and the small of a colonial empire, little honesty and much knavery. And here, in the beginning of the year, under secret orders from King Charles himself to look to the King's fifth of the silver mined, came that Augustin Vela who by his own choice became the forgotten man in the recorded history of Potosi. . . .

* * *

PAST four in the afternoon, Vela came out from the baths and stood under the balcony of the building, pulling on his gloves. Before him, along the street, a stream of the gay and reckless life of this brilliant city flowed. At Panama, where the roads of the world crossed, Vela's dress had been the height of elegance and richness. Yet in the moment his handsome figure was motionless under the balcony, he saw a dozen suitings which surpassed his own. Vela smiled to himself. This was a city!

Refreshed from the baths, the irritations and discomforts of the almost impossible trip into the mountains from the Chilean seacoast steamed away, he was eagerly alert now. It was almost as though he had been born again, this time with the golden spoon of royal favor between his teeth and an opportunity to do the crown so marked a service that Vela would cease to be merely the name of a clan of wild Galician swordsmen and would rank with great grandees of the colonial empire. Here was a metropolis in which he was unknown. Here he had neither friends nor enemies. He could choose his own course and have none to blame for his success or failure but himself.

Vela was about to step down into the street when a commotion at its upper end arrested him. Several of the throng in the street seemed to sense what the stir was without understanding the words shouted down on the wind. These leaped onto walks and under balconies with a sort of desperation. Then the shouts grew more clear.

"*Los Arpones del Rey!* Make way, the King's Lancers!"

Vela sensed the terror which ran through the street crowd with the words. The paving was cleared swiftly, the foot traffic wedging itself frantically against those who had already leaped to the walks. Vela was jostled from his place against the wall of the bath and caught at a pillar supporting the balcony overhead to keep from being forced into the street. Bracing himself, he clung to the timber until those behind him had found their places and ceased struggling so violently. He eased then, turned his head up the street toward the sound of the shouting, and found his nose a hand's breadth away from a broad, grinning face whose owner was pressed against the other side of the pillar.

The grin was light, apparently born of amusement at the frenzy of the crowd. It was friendly. And the lean man who owned it was dressed in the rough clothes of a mountaineer trailsman. A freeman, likely. Spanish blood was dominant if not pure in his veins. Vela, a stranger who had only spoken to the *mozos* in the baths, felt his strangeness in this city. And he was curious.

"A parade?" he asked his neighbor.

The man's eyebrows raised in mild surprise. He pushed a little away from the pillar to look more closely at Vela. His grin became thinner, harder.

"A parade of dogs!" he said softly. "Captain Montejo rides from his offices at the Royal Coffers to an afternoon of gambling at Dona Clara Sinombre's. Montejo and his Lancers!" The last words came scornfully from his lips.

He was about to say something else, but the cause of the excitement along the street had come into view. In any city of old Spain, even in Panama or Nombre de Dios, the procession hammering at full gallop down the narrow and twisting street would have been called a full parade. At its head, sitting an enormous horse, was a huge, heavy-browed man. Vela saw that his great thighs and calves stretched his hose to its limit and that his doublet lacked a full handbreadth of fastening in front. Behind this giant, riding in close formation with light, devilish tournament lances at rest, came a dozen magnificently uniformed, laughing troopers. A hundred yards from the baths, an old Indian woman on the edge of the walk suddenly threw her shawl over her head as though there

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were evil in looking at these horsemen.

The sudden movement, the billowing of the shawl, startled a near horse. It shied nervously, jolting its rider and causing his lance to dip from its rigid place in the formation. The man bawled out an oath, rose in his seat and brought the shaft of his lance down across the old woman's head so savagely that it broke a foot back from the gleaming steel of its point. This seemed to anger the man more and he rose higher, as though to beat the old woman further. But she had dropped limply at the first blow.

The leader, who had pulled up at the altercation, passed some rough joke at the man with the broken lance and set steel to his great horse. The party came thundering on down the street. Directly across from Vela, a *duena* from one of the poorer houses of the city was excitedly shepherding her charges together, two little girls and a small, square-shouldered boy of a dozen years. When the Lancers were almost on him, the boy broke away suddenly and ran out into the path of the giant on the big horse. Fearless, the boy raised a clenched fist and his clear voice rang out over the crowd.

"Thief! Traitor! Wastrel! Coward!"

THE captain of the lancers colored so deeply his face went purple. His thick lips rolled back from great yellow teeth. And he jabbed the short shanks of his spurs deeper into the flanks of his galloping horse. Complete silence held the crowd then, for it was clear that the Lancer intended to ride the boy down.

Vela leaped from the walk like an arrow. It was his duty, and he knew it, not to distinguish himself until the time was ripe. But he couldn't stand still and watch this.

He was aware as he hit the middle of the street that the man who had been beside him was still there. As he turned toward the oncoming horseman, he realized the man with the smiling face had hooked up the boy, dragging him back toward the *duena* on the far walk. Then he had no time to notice anything else. The captain of the lancers had dropped his own shaft, couching it at a level with Vela's chest.

Vela spread his legs a little and leaned toward the steel. As it came, he swerved with uncanny balance a little to one side. This caused the head of the lance to pass under his arm without hurt. In the next instant, he leaped powerfully to one side, clearing himself of the flying hoofs of the huge horse. And at the same time, he twisted with all the pull of his body, clamping the shaft of the lance tightly to him. This pull, the quick surge of the twisting motion, and the momentum of the captain's horse all combined to tear the lance from the big man's grasp.

He reined sharply, pulling the huge animal about in a rearing pivot with consummate horsemanship, and charged back at the man on foot, hauling at his sabre. But Vela gave him no chance to free the steel. Holding the lance like a cudgel, he swung it in a whipping, whistling stroke. The captain of the lancers tried to get his arm up. But he was too slow. The shaft just cleared his shoulder and rapped woodenly against the line of his jaw and the side of his head under his ear. The great legs straightened in their stirrups, forcing the huge frame upright.

For an instant the officer fought dully to keep his seat. Then he tumbled to the paving. Vela saw him fall. He knew, also, that the man was barely stunned, that he would be on his feet in a moment. And this first day in Potosi the last thing he wanted was to appear before the governor in explanation of an attack on an officer of the King's Lancers. Besides, the rest of the troop was crowding forward, trying to get around the officer's horse and at the man who had felled him.

Ducking, he drove into the crowd, careless now of whom he jostled. Beside the building which housed the baths was a narrow passageway leading to the rear where the fires burned for heating the water. Vela made this, crammed into it, and raced along its length. He heard one pair of feet pounding behind him and feared pursuit. But when he looked, he saw it was the grinning mountain man and that he was waving him desperately on.

In the fire yard back of the baths, the mountain man caught up with Vela and took the lead. They plowed into another narrow, twisting passageway, reached another street, crossed it, and leaped into a

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deep doorway. Following his guide's quick direction, Vela pressed himself flat against the wall of the doorway. A moment later two shouting lancers rode madly past, their sabres hanging naked from lanyards at their wrists and their lances level. Two more parties of the soldiery passed while they crouched in the doorway. Finally the mountain man eased away from the wall. Vela saw that the sharp concern was gone from the man's face.

"*Purissima!*" the man said, and he laughed. "You do nothing by halves, eh, *señor?* Feodor Montejo beaten on the head with his own lance-stick as coolly as his trooper beats an old woman. *Ai!* That is talk for the fancy ones at Dona Clara's. Ha! How that lady will make her fun with Montejo for this. Who are you, *señor?* I must know such a fine fellow!"

"Gustin," Vela said. This familiar form of his first name was all he dared now to part with. Later, when his work was done in Potosi, he would give it all out, adding to it the titles which would come from the king when he had broken up the ring of thieves who were defrauding the government of its lawful fifth of silver.

His companion looked at him sharply. A wry, curious light touched his smile.

"Gustin—it is not much of a name, *señor!* But—well, it will do for the man who beat Montejo! And your business?"

Vela scowled. But the other's friendliness was so apparent he let it pass.

"I have no business. Further, I have no master and I owe no debts. I am a man. I am here. That is enough."

"No business, eh? And no master? You speak plainly, Gustin. And I, Adan, am a man who can understand you. One wears the thin steel of a cavalier, the other the knife of the mountain trails. But both are brigands, eh? And both hate Feodor Montejo. There is work for us both in this silver hell! Come, I know a cafe where there will be friends. I'll make you a welcome to the Imperial City of Potosi!"

CHAPTER TWO

The Silver Palace

ADAN led Gustin Vela across half of the great city. On every hand Vela saw palaces, houses rising to the third and fourth tier of floors. Gilt carriages on the streets and Morgan horses in harness. Men and women moving with the arrogance that comes so often with wealth and ease and idleness.

At his side, Adan watched his face with interest, but said nothing. They at last turned into a low building whose entrance was below the level of the street. Adan knocked at a door, passed a word through the crack it was opened, and they were admitted into a large hall. Tables were scattered about. Girls of three races, Indian, Spanish, and Negro, moved among them. Some carried heaping dishes of food; others brilliantly stained glass carafes of wine and spirits. Still others carried no more than warm eyes and seductive smiles for those who begged their company at one table and then another.

At the far end of the hall musicians were adding to the general clamor and a lithe Negro girl was dancing to the beat of the clapping hands of thirty or forty men gathered around her. It was a man in this crowd who first saw the newcomers. His voice smashed down the room in a booming welcome.

"Adan!"

The man caught at the arm of the dancing girl, stopping her in midstep. He raised his hand at the orchestra and it fell silent. The silence traveled up the room like a wave, breaking about Vela and his guide. Adan's head swung over the company. His grin was friendly, warm with comradeship.

"Go to it, comrades!" he laughed. "Right now I'm hungry. Later you'll meet a friend. And a good one. You'll see!"

The dancer began her pirouetting. The crowd reformed about her. The music recommenced. Vela looked at his companion with a new respect. Here was a man who had power.

AFTER a tremendous dinner which filled Vela for the first time since he had left the sultry plenty of the mosquito coast, Adan talked freely.

"You are surprised we have such a tidy little company here, friend," he said. "But look, there is pure silver coming from some hundred and thirty mills in this city, to the beautiful tune of ten thou-

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sand doubloons of gold value a day. Some is spent for goods brought in over the mountains. Some is sent out for banking. Even a small trickle is left, after Montejo's greed has butchered the king's share, to be sent on to Spain. But the greater part of it stays here for a while, to be gambled, wagered, given away to pretty faces and soft eyes. This money is fair game to us, from the moment it leaves a mine-owner's vault till it finally reaches the chests in the palace of Dona Clara Sinombre. No one misses what we take. It gives us a good living. And we devil Feodor Montejo. There is no hunting ground equal to Potosi!"

"This Dona Clara, she's a courtesan?"

Adan leaned forward sharply. "Quiet, Gustin! More men have died in Potosi for dropping a careless word about that woman than the Inquisition has racked at Panama! Everywhere, at every corner, even in this room are fools who are under her spell. Men who take to her every *peseta* they can beg, borrow or steal, either in coin or gifts. Hers is a wide-spread legion and they are quick to defend her honor. Even the surly Montejo has not escaped her. Only Adan and the fat old ones like Governor Fonseca, whose age makes them safe. Even I have been weakened the times I have been close to her!

"Ha! In the outside provinces, they say Beltran Fonseca is Governor of Potosi. But they don't know. A courtesan, Gustin? No! A great lady, in spite of the fact Sinombre means 'without a name'. A lady who found that men were fools who would make millions, who would break their backs, rob, kill, and lie to bring her tribute. She knows what she wants from life—all that it holds. And she's getting it! We know that our silver is all going to her, that there is no law in the city, that she is pulling down our walls about our heads. But we love it, *señor*. Only in Potosi is there such a woman!"

Vela nodded his head thoughtfully. Adan's dinner and the music in the background made him drowsy. But his mind was extraordinarily sharp. On the trip through the mountains, he had given much thought to wondering where a man who stole from the royal treasury, if such stealing was afoot, would spend his booty. The king's accountants had gone carefully over the reports of metal mined at Potosi and there was a staggering discrepancy between the percentage which should have been received in Cadiz and the amount actually delivered. With a swordsman's distrust of figures, Vela had been inclined to see exaggeration in the accounts. But the picture Adan made of a fascinating, greedy woman gave them a ring of truth. Men fighting for a woman's favor could spend vast sums. As proof of this, Vela had a memory of the disappearance of his own inheritance. A wry smile crossed his face. Adan, seeing it, smashed the heel of his hand down onto the table.

"*Por Dios,* Gustin, you don't believe me!" he roared. "Well, I'll show you!"

He shouted down the room. An old man came hurrying through a rear door to the table.

"Get this coastal doubter a rig of clothes that will pass at Dona Clara's. And lay out a fine outfit for me. I'll show him something he'll not forget. And now, Gustin, since it will take old Needles, our tailor, some time to make us into gentlemen fit for the court of Potosi, we'll have a drink."

Vela looked down with a pardonable vanity at the suiting the *mozos* at the baths had brushed out for him. It had been the best material available at Panama, and the tailor to the Viceroy himself had done the fitting and seaming. He doubted the need for more elegant dress.

Adan lifted a flagon of wine, looked across it at Vela's face, and laughed.

"You'll see!" he promised. "You'll see. And besides, were your clothes right, they'd have to be changed, anyway. Montejo will long remember that yellow doublet you wear, after what happened this afternoon. He might forget your face. Hope so, Gustin. Hope so, hard. Montejo is no stronger in the barracks of his own lancers than he is at Dona Clara Sinombre's!"

THE tailor in the cellar gathering place of Adan's brigands was a magician. In an hour Vela and his host climbed into a gleaming carriage and four. To the passersby they were a pair of rich, idle *elegantes,* out to dine or to pay court to their favorites among the ladies of the city.

They rattled swiftly through the city,

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coming at last to a grill-enclosed park on a side street. In the center of this park stood the most beautiful house Vela had ever seen. It rose three floors in height, flinging wings in the four directions. And from every window light gleamed brilliantly. In the wide, paved carriage ground to one side more than a hundred carriages were drawn up in even rows, the coachmen gathering in little knots to talk or game while they waited. Vela knew this must be the house of the queen of Potosi. And automatically he began preparing himself to face her. She would be in her mature years, regal, and quite likely restless with the utter boredom of a woman who has known too many lovers.

Vela was surprised when the coachman did not turn into the park, but held on, skirting the wrought-iron fence grills to the next corner. Here he turned, went down this darker side street until he came to an unpaved track which ran off in the gloom behind the mansion. He turned onto this and finally pulled up in deep shadows at one corner of the back yard of the estate. The place smelled abominably of refuse and filth. Adan leaped lightly from the coach, ran across the yard, and pulled open a shabby door, such as might lead into a storeroom. Vela followed him into this little cubicle and Adan shut the door. He chuckled in the darkness.

"Adan is a cautious thief!" he said. "There are men among the guards at the door who would know my face in any dress. But not having seen me enter, they would not recognize me among the guests. This is Adan's private doorway into the house of Sinombre. Patience, our porter will be here in a moment."

Adan began knocking with gentle insistence against the wall somewhere in the room. Presently shuffling steps muttered beyond a partition and a narrow, hidden door opened almost at Vela's elbow. Silhouetted in the dimly lighted opening was the shapeless form of a huge, ageless Indian woman. Adan spoke rapidly to her.

"It's me, Adan, Rosalia. I'm lonesome. My friend and I've come to dance."

The silhouette raised thick arms, whether in protest or horror Vela couldn't tell.

"*Ai,* you goat of the mountain! I am an old fool. One man I can let through the passage. But two—one of whom she has never seen—admitted to my lady's rooms! You ask far too much of friendship, Adan!"

"*Pues si!*" Adan laughed. "But of course. And isn't it worth it, *mamasita?* Hurry, now. Such a smell as there is here!"

The old woman turned and led the way along a passage which Vela soon discovered ran between the partitions forming a wall, so that it was hidden and secret. They came to a flight of steps which creaked under the weight of the old serving woman ahead. She turned, holding her fingers to her lips. At the head of these steps she stopped suddenly. The muted sound of voices came from ahead.

"Listen! The *señorita!* She entertains in the rooms for a moment. Here! You stay at this spot, both of you. Don't move until my lady has gone below stairs again. On your lives, don't move!"

THE old servant pushed past Adan and Vela, taking with her the candle, and went back the way they had come. The voices ahead continued, rising and falling. Vela paid little attention for several moments. Then the male voice of the two suddenly raised sharply, booming against the walls. The words were still unintelligible. But the voice was not. Vela recognized it. So did Adan.

"The devil!" he said, and he drew a sharp breath between his teeth. "Montejo!"

Without another word they moved up the passageway. Adan's hand searched in a place he seemed to know and another narrow door opened into a small room as black as the hidden corridor. There was an overpowering, heady aroma of many expensive perfumes, and Vela's outstretched hands came against a rack from which hung endless folds of dainty materials. Obviously they must be in the gown-rooms. Light showed under another door. And from beyond it, the voices were plain and clear. One was soft, sounding with a deliberate resonance like a carefully plucked string. The other was the hoarse trumpet of Feodor Montejo. And Montejo was threatening.

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"You misunderstand me deliberately, *señorita!*" he growled. "I said nothing of love. I'm not a silly fool in a silk doublet! I know my looks. I have no vanity. Love is a thing for pages and serving girls, who have nothing else. I am offering you something greater. Power, *señorita.* Not a small share of the silver of Potosi, but all of it! I need your help for my plans. And for your help, I'll make you empress of the Andes!"

"I do not misunderstand you at all, Feodor!" the woman's voice returned calmly. "I have never misunderstood a man in my life. Else how would I have what I now have? I have power, more even than you who have taken what you wanted with your Lancers. But not yet do I have enough silver. Bring me an offer that will interest me and I will listen. And be glad that you were wise enough not to talk to me of love! Go, now. I must get back to my guests!"

Vela stood stupefied. Montejo, talking

"There is not overmuch of honor in my blood, my lady," Vela said.

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of an Andean empire! The man was not only a thief but a traitor. A sudden excitement boiled up in him. The good king would reward him well for the capture of a thief. For a traitor he would certainly be knighted. He turned eagerly toward Adan, catching at his sleeve. But at that moment the door of the dressing room was flung back. A shaft of light plunged into its dark interior, catching the two men full in its path. And in the doorway stood Dona Clara Sinombre.

"Well, gentlemen?" she said quietly.

CHAPTER THREE

Swordsman's Way

VELA stood motionless among the endless racks of splendor. He stood silent when he knew that Adan and he were in real and grave danger. In countless adventures of his past his nimble tongue and the right kind of a smile had pulled him through worse moments. But he couldn't force a sound through his lips. It wasn't fear. It wasn't anything he had ever known. For he was awed—by a woman!

He had been prepared to face Dona Clara Sinombre. He had even thought a little of the flowery phrasing and the courtliness with which he would address her. She was a woman. It was a gift of the Vela clan that they understood women and could deal with them. But not such a woman as this! First, she was young. Incredibly youthful and fresh. And, *ai*—she was beautiful. Not the lush and scented beauty that he had expected. Her beauty had the unmatched quality of the living steel in a Toledo blade—a beauty tempered and flexible and strong. He had expected a courtesan. He found a cavalier—in a woman's gown and with a woman's heady weapons for supplement.

Vaguely he was aware that his companion's mountain boldness was useless before this woman and that the bluff outlaw was waiting for him to speak. He already held his plumed hat in his hands. He swept it across in front of his knees and bent forward over it.

"*Señorita!*" he said softly. "A thousand pardons for this intrusion!"

Dona Clara's head inclined slightly, but she addressed her first words to Adan.

"Leave us, brigand," she said. "Find Rosalia. Tell her it is my order you are to be taken to the pantry. There is enough wine to sop even a *bandido* chieftain, I think. And you are not to hurry your return."

Adan blinked wordlessly and looked at Vela. Then he crossed to a door and let himself out of the room. Dona Clara moved to a pillowed couch. Vela followed her, sitting stiffly on its edge a sword's length from the nearest fold of her gown. She looked at him for a keen moment, measuring him as a man measures an adversary.

"Tell me, *Señor* Vela, tell me how much you overheard there in the dark."

She said it suddenly, like a swordsman shifting from *en garde* to a full lunge without a pause for fence. Vela smiled tightly to himself. This was a clever woman! She knew his name. What else? He leaned a little forward.

"Presently," he nodded. "You will permit me caution. How well is the name of Augustin Vela known to you? I must know that, first, *señorita!*"

A quick frown of impatience creased the woman's brow. She put her weight forward against her hand on the couch.

"Everything!" she answered. "There are no secrets from me in Potosi. A woman alone is more cautious than any man! You know you are on a fool's errand? You know that not even a Galician Vela can break the power of Feodor Montejo and his lancers? You need help, my reckless friend!"

Vela smiled and bowed a little again. "You offer it to me, *señorita?*"

Dona Clara leaned closer to him. "I offer more than that, *señor!* You think I love Potosi. Maybe you even think I love His Catholic Majesty, the King. I don't!" She stood up and crossed the room to a low table. Picking up a small, gleaming metal bar, she carried it back and dropped it beside Vela.

"I care for this, and this only—silver! Montejo was a tool when he robbed the king to spend the silver over my gaming-tables. Now he talks of empire, of becoming king himself, and he is dangerous. Montejo has a great body and a strong arm, but no brains. You are different!"

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Vela made courteous acknowledgment, but with a mocking smile on his lips. *"Señorita!"*

Dona Clara sat down, close enough to him now that he was conscious of her subtle fragrance and the pulsing, vital life of her.

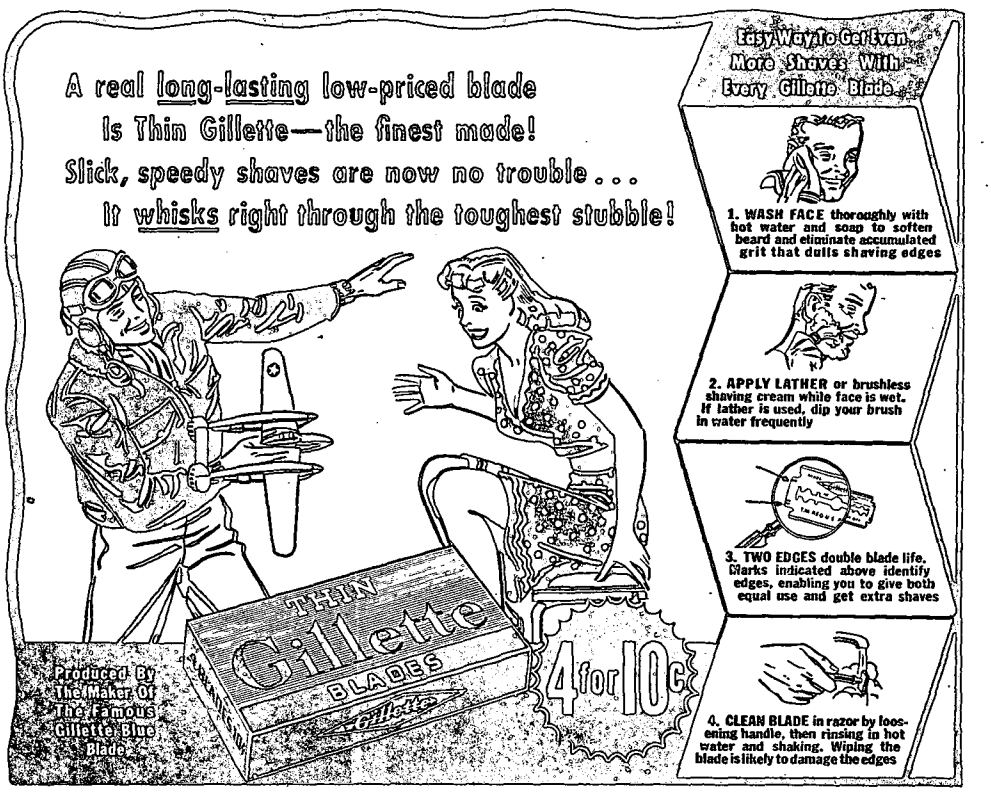
"I have friends in Potosi, for I have been courted by every grandee who has come to these mountains. I know how to bind them to me with a refusal. If Montejo were to meet a better sword than himself, and die—well, it is possible, *señor,* that Clara Sinombre could make that man Captain of Lancers and Collector of Revenue. The fate of a special agent of the king floats on the uneasy current of royal moods and favor. Think of that Colon, that Cristoforo who found this land for Ferdinand Rey. Dead, in a pauper's prison! There are neither paupers nor prisons in Potosi. Only silver—enough for us both!"

"There is not overmuch of honor in my blood, my lady," Vela said, and he stood up. "I see you have checked my name back a generation to find this. And you tempt me. Sorely, *señorita.* But think of the rich men you know, even here in Potosi. They grow old and push a great belly before them and die in their beds of apoplexy. Not for a Vela! I beg you forgive me, *señorita*—but no!"

A faint, provocative smile pulled at the woman's mouth. She caught the sleeve of his jacket and pulled him down beside her. Where she had been intense before, she was langorous now. Electric warning rang in Vela, but hot blood pounded, too.

"A cavalier's answer, from a cavalier," Dona Clara said. "I expected no less. But think of this house, *señor.* Not always is it crowded. There are gardens in the park. And there are nights of summer here as gentle as Castile. Would it mean nothing to be not only master of Potosi but consort to her queen?"

Vela took a deep breath. Sultry, half-promising eyes probed his own. Perfume was about him. The challenging ring of steel or the softness of a beautiful woman—the hot blood of his Galician clansmen could refuse neither. He bent toward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Dona Clara's hand. The woman had chosen her weapons. Let her look to them!

BUT before his lips touched the graceful fingers caught up in his own, the door burst violently inward. Adan pulled up abruptly in the center of the room. His plumed hat was askew on his head. He forgetfully held a half-finished bottle of Madeira in one hand. And fear was in his eyes. The wide bulk of Rosalia was right behind him and the old woman was belaboring him with her tongue. Adan got a few grim words out before the Indian woman drowned him out.

"We're undone, Gustin!" the brigand cried. "The lancers have surrounded the house!"

"Fool!" Rosalia shrilled. "You call yourself a brigand! A clever fellow! Fagh! Why didn't you send your carriage back where it came from, if you had to ride in one? The lancers found it, waiting on up the alley. Now they'll search the house. Señor Montejo swears a king's spy rode in it. *Ai,* you goat!"

Vela straightened beside the couch. Dona Clara clung to his sleeve.

"Well, *señor?*"

Vela smiled broadly and disengaged her hand, holding it for a moment. "Gustin Vela is an humble man, *señorita;*" he said. "Talk of silver kings and queens has left him stunned. He can only regret we could not talk of men and women. Ah, if you were but a serving girl!"

Quick, high color flooded Dona Clara's face. She paused a moment as though to give him opportunity to recall his words. Then she turned, and running to a window casement, she flung the sash out and called to the lancers milling below.

"Here! Here is your spy. Up here—by the back way!"

An eager shout answered her, and the sound of booted heels on the flagging of a courtyard. Vela's eyes crossed to the waiting figure of Adan. The brigand's shoulders rose and fell in an expressive shrug. The gesture plainly said that all men have equal shares of good luck and bad; that they had drawn the wrong cards this night.

Vela touched Adan's arm, speaking quick and softly.

"Straighten your hat, friend, the plume's drooping. Now, quick, but don't look like you're in a hurry. She told them the back stairs. We'll try the front. Respectable people, even in Potosi, leave a party when soldiers come. We might make it!"

Adan jerked at his hat, wheeled, and stepped out through a door into the upper hall. Vela was in his tracks, palming the thick key on the inside of the lock as he passed, and turning the tumbler when he'd swung the door swiftly shut behind him. Within the room they'd left, he heard a sudden angry outcry and the sound of Dona Clara's hands pounding the thick planking. But his attention was ahead.

Moving into the upper hall, they turned down the impressive breadth of the main stairs of the house—two gentlemen strolling casually. Halfway down, they passed a pair of lancers. They were ordinary troopers, apparently stationed where they could watch the crowd below. They hardly glanced at Vela and Adan. There was a stir in the front quarter of the ballroom at the foot of the stairs. A heavy, overdressed man with a kind, round face and gentle eyes was apparently taking his leave in haste.

"Fonseca!" Adan whispered without moving his lips. "The governor doesn't like the lancers any better than the rest of us!"

Vela nodded and stepped onto the floor of the ballroom, angling sharply across to get into the crowd about the governor. For the moment the lancers in the courtyard who had been hailed by Dona Clara had not entered the central portion of the house. There were seconds yet. Maybe enough of them. Vela fought an urge to run. They were halfway across the ballroom. They were three-quarters across. Still nothing happened. Vela could sense a lightening in Adan's step and he saw the man's grin growing wider and more pleased every instant.

Then, when the fringe of the governor's suite was almost in front of them, Feodor Montejo came out of a side gallery, stopped when his eyes fastened on them, and his angry voice roared across the huge hall.

"There are the dogs! Take them!"

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MONTEJO started driving through the hastily opening crowd toward Vela and Adan. But the big man was too far away to be an immediate threat. Fat old Luis Fonseca almost dove out the front door, cutting his goodnights off sharply at Montejo's roar. The breaking up of the crowd at the door gave several lancers in it a chance to get free. These were the problem. Vela's hand swept back. His thin rapier slid free like a flash of wicked light. Adan, beside him, seemed to have fully regained his composure. The mountain man freed his own heavier blade and spoke from between tight teeth.

"A little work, *amigo!*"

Vela took the first lancer with his point, flicking his slender blade clear of the whistling stroke of the soldier's sabre and setting the rapier through the man between his second and third buttons. The lancer staggered back, fouling one of his comrades, and fell heavily. Someone in the crowd swore a round oath. Adan rang steel on steel with a second lancer, tricked him with a simple piece of footwork, and half-severed his head.

Soldiers pressed in about them. Montejo was almost on them. Between his teeth, Vela spat out a word.

"The door!"

He wheeled, keeping his face to the savage, slashing steel, and fought his way backward. Adan turned in the same fashion. Vela reached behind him, felt the great handle of the door, and tripped the latch. He made a sudden drive forward, took his closest foe through the throat, ran another through the arm, then spun and dove out the door. Adan came behind him, dragging the door shut. A carriage was wheeling out of the carriage ground, rolling with increasing speed past the portico as they raced out.

Neither of them said a word, but ran madly. Vela caught the door handle of the carriage, wrenched it open, and hauled himself inside. Adan was on his heels, slamming the door. They turned to the occupant beside them and Adan laughed at the look of injured pride and startled fear on the man's face.

"*Ai,* Gustin!" he roared. "You teach me to travel in good company. His Excellency, the Governor! We are obliged, *señor!*"

Luis Fonseca's fat belly shook fearfully. "Get out!" he said once. But he didn't say it loudly. Moments later, when the carriage was rolling down the main avenue and half a dozen small work parties of Lancers had been passed, riding purposefully out to dragnet the city, Adan spoke to the governor again.

"It's customary for the governor of a province to entertain an agent of his king. *Seguro!* I am certain of this. So why shouldn't the governor of a city? *Excelencia,* we accept your hospitality in the name of His Catholic Majesty. We will stay at your house!"

He turned to Vela with a wicked grin. "At least Montejo will not think of looking for us there till we've had time to catch our breaths and you've had time to think up some other brave way for us to die!"

CHAPTER FOUR

I've Killed Me a Lancer

UNDER the prodding of a short knife in the hands of the grinning brigand beside him, His Excellency, Luis Fonseca, ordered his coachman to drive close to a side door of his palace. Three men, his excellency one of them, tumbled out of the carriage here and slid into the house, their arrival screened from the surrounding streets by a heavy growth of shrubbery. Once within the building, Adan swiftly made a circuit of the house, speaking shortly to every servant he encountered. While Adan was gone, the old governor seized Vela's arm in a nervous, pleading grip.

"You are, in fact, His Majesty's agent?" he begged. Vela nodded. Fonseca's grip tightened.

"Then I beg of you, *señor,* help an old man in trouble! My authority is gone. Even brigands laugh at me. And Feodor Montejo—he makes a joke of my office. Montejo and that soulless woman are plotting against me. I know it and what can I do? One old man against a whole evil city? Montejo wants power. The woman wants wealth. I want only peace and prosperity for my city and enough honor that I can retire when my term is finished. But Montejo commands all of the soldiers

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—we have only the lancers here. Dona Clara Sinombre commands miners, merchants, smelters—every man who has money in the city. She commands them as a queen commands her courtiers. Every man of them would die for her. And she would ask their death, I fully believe, if it would put more silver in her vaults! What can an old man do?"

Vela wrenched his arm from Fonseca's grip. The governor backed heavily into a chair and dropped his round face into his hands with a little moan of despair. Vela couldn't tell for certain whether the man's obvious fear actually was rooted in Montejo and Dona Clara or whether it was a fresher terror born of the presence of a special agent of the king.

Then Adan came running excitedly from the upper floor and shouted at him, "Such a bath! Tubs upon tubs of hot water. All heated for His Excellency. And being a good host, he offers it to us. A tub we can swim in—steaming, perfumed—*Ai!* You do offer it, Excellency?"

Fonseca nodded without raising his head. Adan chuckled and turned back up the stairs. Vela followed him. Moments later, in the bath, Adan's face lost its grin. A sombre and calculating look ridged his wide forehead.

"You are a good man for making plans, Gustin?" he asked. "I hope it! We need plans. Sooner or later, if Montejo does not catch the two of us, he will become afraid. He knows I have many men, waiting for me at the cafe now. He knows you are a government official and can command authority. He has been a long time building his plans here. He is, I think, waiting only until he is certain the Dona Clara will throw in with him. Then—pouf!—His Majesty loses the richest city in his empire and all of the wealth of Potosi!"

Vela nodded. Adan stretched himself in the steaming water of the bath and sighed luxuriously.

"Me, for one, I don't care about it. Let Montejo, or the king—whichever is the stronger—have the silver. It is my neck I think of. I have lived long and well with our fat host as governor. That is to say, under the rule of the king. But Montejo doesn't like me, I think. So I must fight for His Majesty. There was a roguish looking fellow among Fonseca's servants. I sent him to the cafe. Shortly we will have some men. We will need our plan, then!"

Even with Adan's rascals at his back, Gustin Vela knew he had troubles facing him before he could complete his mission unless—Vela sat up abruptly. A smile of pleasure lit his face. Ha! This might not be so bad, after all. Dona Clara Sinombre was easier to face than a soldier's lance. And perhaps a clever man could strike as hard at Montejo through her as he could with a sword. He turned to Adan, but before he could speak a terrified houseman burst the door of the bath open.

"Señores!" he moaned. "The lancers! They are here, breaking in the door without waiting even for the permission of His Excellency! A bad thing! A bad thing!"

Vela and Adan leaped out of the governor's great marble tub and dragged clothing on over their wet bodies. Making sure only that his baldric hung straight and his steel was at hand, Vela plowed out of the room into the wide upper hall at the head of the stairs.

Loud voices rang in the lower hall—harsh, military voices, without any of the deference a man should use in the rooms of a governor. Vela's eyes swept the doors about him, looking for a place where two men might stand off many. This was fat old Luis Fonseca's opportunity. Now he would pay back the rascals who had taken over both his carriage and his house. A word about their presence to the lancers and he would not only rid himself of them, but gain favor with Montejo.

VELA leaned far over the upper balustrade. Luis Fonseca, puffing with heat and anger, stood in the center of the lower hall. Four lancers were crowded about him. Their leader, a short, gross little man Vela recognized from Adan's description as Dorotan, the director of the mint, had a firm grip on the governor's arm. Luis Fonseca, moving with surprising violence, threw this grip off.

"Hands off of me, you yelping dog!" the old man roared. "How is it lancers touch the Governor of Potosi! I give you room to pass me, for I have no soldiery of my own. But I'll not take insult! I came alone in my carriage, I tell you.

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You talk madness—Luis Fonseca hiding thieves in his house. They're not here!"

Vela gasped in astonishment. And he looked at the fat man below with a new admiration. Dorotan stepped back from the governor and laughed.

"We have two errands here, Excellency," he said with an ironic, overdone bow. "Montejo gave us two orders. 'Find the thieves and bring me the fat pig.' You're finished, Fonseca. It is Montejo's city now—the lancers' city. You and the king—fagh! Take him up, boys!"

The lancers pressed in. The old man, spinning his quivering bulk, caught the hilt of the sabre at the side of one of them, jerked it free, and made a whistling, savage pass at the nearest of them. The mocking smile faded from Dorotan's dark face. His lips curled back from his teeth and he slid his own weapon free. Vela didn't wait to see more. He had found a friend where he had not expected to find one. Friends in this place were worth fighting for. He vaulted the upper rail, landed lightly on the landing below, and ran swiftly down the last flight of steps, straight at the tangle of uniforms about the governor. Behind him he heard a thin, rocking yell, and Adan's half-clothed figure hurtled down beside him. Fonseca, by a mighty, desperate stroke, had already split the head of a lancer to his chin when Adan's howl turned the attention of the others to the men on the stairs. In thirty seconds, it was over with. Four men lay sprawled on the tiling of the floor and Luis Fonseca, swearing like a freighter, was rubbing a furrow scratched in one fat forearm and grinning at the blood on the steel in his other hand.

"Quick," Vela snapped, "we've got to get out of this!"

"Seguro!" Adan answered him. "Sure, but how, *amigo?* You heard what Dorotan said. Montejo is afraid of us. He has decided not to wait. He's taking over the city. We're to get through the streets now, are we? And where are we to go?"

Fonseca waved the sabre in his hand and laughed, his round belly shaking.

"I've killed me a Lancer!" he exulted. "What does it matter where I go now? Name it, *señores.* I'm with you!"

Vela caught sight of the coachman, standing just inside the entrance and staring at the dead men on the floor. He turned to Adan.

"Leave a message for your men. We'll go. Grab that fellow and put him in the coach. You and I'll take the doublets from two of these dogs. Tell the coachman to shout, 'Make way for the Lancers!' as loud as he can. Tell him to drive like the devil. We'll try to pass on the streets as taking His Excellency to Montejo."

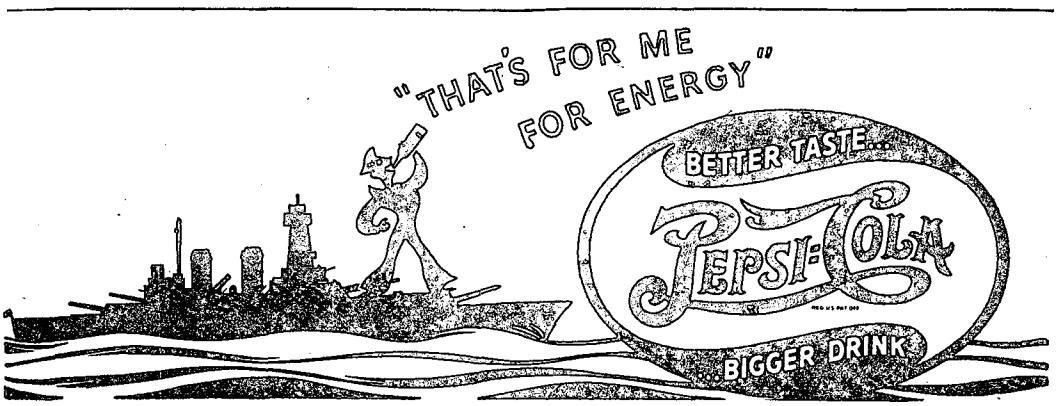
"Tell him to drive," Adan echoed. "But where, Gustin?"

"Checkmate to Montejo!" Vela snapped. "We've got to beat him. We've got to head him off. Drive to Dona Clara's!"

CHAPTER FIVE

The Queen of Potosi

THE speed of the carriage and the shouts of the driver made a clear passage through townsmen and lancers alike. Once or twice a uniformed officer glanced sharply at the governor's



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carriage, but turned away with satisfaction when he caught sight of the bright lancer jackets on Adan and Vela.

They made the gates of Dona Clara's mansion without being stopped. Now the gaming salons and the great ballroom on the lower floor were closed and dark. The only lights were on the second floor of the wing which held Dona Clara's private quarters. Vela breathed easier when he saw that Montejo had withdrawn his troop from the house.

Stopping the carriage just off the street inside the gate, Vela and his companions climbed out and circled the house to the door giving onto the hidden back stairs. As the three of them moved, Vela's mind was busy. This woman had made him an offer—a proposition. It was his turn to repay in kind. But his would be an offer she couldn't refuse! He would be certain of that.

Moving swiftly up the hidden stairs, Vela was the first to step into the lighted sitting-room. Rosalia, crouching fearfully at her mistress' feet, began to moan when she saw Vela. Dona Clara silenced her with a quick hand.

"Ha!" she said, tilting her head up. "The nobody who'd become a grandee by serving his king has come back! I thought he would. But did the Galician sword-juggler think Dona Clara Sinombre would give him another chance to sit beside her?"

Vela shook his head. *"Pues,* no, *señorita!"* he answered. "I said once I was too humble a man. The mere company of the governor doesn't change that. I came to help you, to repay your offer. Listen. You said the gentlemen of Potosi were your men. Call them up, *senorita,* I beg you. With them at our backs, with the guidance of His Excellency, we'll work the king's justice on Montejo and his outlaw lancers. In return, what you have will not be confiscated. And hereafter, so long as your games are honest and you do not corrupt king's officers and the soldiery, you shall live as you have."

Vela saw that for a moment she was troubled. He had the feeling she was not thinking of her fate in Potosi, but of him. Then her guard came up.

"If I refuse, Gustin Vela?" she asked coldly. Vela saw Adan glance meaningfully toward a window overlooking the alley at the rear. He crossed to it with long strides and jerked it open. Adan's sensitive ears had caught movement there and understood it. The brigands from the cafe across the town were taking the big rear door from its hinges. In moments they would be in the house. The girl crossed to him and he pointed down.

"There are our tools, my lady. Not many, but sharp. Refuse us and we will do what we can with them."

A thin, hard smile was on the girl's lips. She stepped back from the window, and stopped, poised and listening. Vela listened, too. He could hear the muted sounds. Sabre-chains rattling on scabbards. Low commands. The creak of many saddles. The lancers, surrounding the house! Dona Clara's smile widened, triumph without happiness in it.

"There's my answer, gentlemen!" she cried. "I saw your carriage stop at the gate. I sent a servant for Montejo. He may be a fool, but he sets the silver of Potosi and Clara Sinombre above a braggart's honor! You're undone, Gustin Vela. What kind of peace will you make now?"

Vela swore under his breath. In this instant he knew the girl had done this, not to protect her own interests, but to spite a man whose ear had been deaf when she spoke to him. And the hopelessness of a swordsman at war with a woman shook him. But he held his voice level.

"I'll make no peace!" he said. "Not before a fight!"

Almost at the same instant, the ringing clash of steel on steel echoed in the upper hall outside of the apartment. A yell rolled within the walls. Adan wheeled.

"My lads! My little black dogs from the hills! The lancers are in the house!"

The brigand pulled open the door and ran into the narrow passage leading out to the main hall. Luis Fonseca trotted after him, flexing a thick sabre across his chest. Vela turned to follow, but the girl leaped in front of him.

"Think, Gustin! It's yours to say, still. Choose! Sinombre's silver or Montejo's steel with the rest of them!"

Angered by her insistence and the delay, Vela flung the girl aside and rushed toward the door after his companions. As he reached the door, he pulled at his rapier. But he never freed the weapon.

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He heard the rustle of the girl's gown too late. He hunched his head down with instinctive reflex. But she was close and she struck hard. His knees buckled, and he fell.

A GREAT clamor rang in Vela's head. He felt hands on him, hands tugging and dragging at his doublet and his legs. He struggled against them, got his feet under him, and slowly raised upright. Rosalia was beside him, her old face running tears. At his other elbow was Dona Clara Sinombre.

"Merciful heaven!" the girl breathed. "He is conscious again, Rosalia! Quick, Gustin, quick to the old stairs. We've time, still!"

Vela pulled his arm free. He had located the source of the clamor. It came down the passageway from the central hall of the house. Adan! Fonseca! The brigands! And Montejo's lancers! His hand went to the hilt of his blade. Dona Clara caught at his wrist, pushed at him, trying to force his staggering feet toward the door of the dressing room and the top of the hidden stairway. He shook her loose again.

"*Querida,* understand me!" Tears were in her eyes, now. "I am the fool. Oh that I had been born without a man's quick anger in my heart! This is my doing. The brigands will hold Montejo for a little. We'll go—together. Together, Gustin! The servants can follow. They'll bring us my silver—a hundred burro-loads. They'll be yours as I am yours. Quickly!"

Dimly, Vela wondered at the fire in the heart of this silver woman. He wondered if this was another trick to best him—this complete surrender of pride and self. Dazed, his mind was in no shape to weigh such a problem. But he still had his sword arm and his rapier. He pulled away from the girl and reeled across to the door leading into the hallway. Behind him he heard Dona Clara's voice catch on a great sob. Then he heard her speaking to Rosalia.

"Go! Go, *mamasita!*" The rest of the words were lost in the racket of the grim battle in front of him. Adan and Fonseca had taken a position at the head of the narrow corridor leading in to Dona Clara's apartments. A press of lancers in the big central hall had cut them off from the rest of Adan's grimly fighting brigands. Montejo's men had forced the two relentlessly, backing them slowly down the passage. But the retreat had cost the lancers heavily. Fallen men lay thick on the floor of the corridor. As Vela pressed up behind his two friends, Luis Fonseca took the point of a wide sabre through his shoulder. Not a dangerous wound, but painful and paralyzing to his sword arm. The fat governor swore loudly and fell back a step. Vela twisted around him and took his place. Adan grinned.

"*Por los Santos y Dios,* comrade!" he shouted, and dropped the lancer facing him. Before another could come up, a shout rose up in the center of the house and the huge form of Feodor Montejo appeared at the head of the corridor. Beside him was the thin, part-Indian face of Guido LaPaz, his lieutenant. Fonseca saw Vela and roared at his men to clear the corridor. Then he bellowed at the two who blocked his way to the apartments.

"Surrender, you boot-licking court puppy!" he raged. "Surrender or we'll fire the house!"

Vela's rapier had been raised. He lowered it momentarily. Everything Clara Sinombre had won from this devil's city was in this house. He had a right, in the name of his king, to prevent her from joining forces with Montejo's mad plan to annex Potosi from the empire. But his duty was to destroy Montejo, not a woman. Some hurt in childhood, some buffeting of fate, had made her the kind of woman she was. What kind of woman would she be if she lost what she had won here, also?

There are times when a man's duty is gall to his soul. Vela tasted that gall. It sickened him. Montejo started down the corridor, LaPaz beside him. Vela backed a step, then another, Adan moving with him. Vela heard the door open at his back. Clara Sinombre! He turned his head for a glance at her face, expecting to see gratitude there. For the first time in three generations a Vela was surrendering. And surrendering for her!

But her face was a mask, a grim, white mask such as a man wears when he goes to war against insurmountable odds. Only in her eyes, soft and luminous as they met his, was there any hope. A hope which surged through Vela like new blood. And in it he knew there was no trickery.

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"Fight, Gustin!" she begged. "Fight hard, for such a little while—such a little while!"

A LITTLE while! Gustin Vela tipped his head back, laughing. Ha! A Galician could fight forever for such a look from those eyes! Montejo heard that laugh and understood it; he flung up his sabre and charged. Vela took the captain's huge steel on his thin blade. Adan engaged LaPaz. In a pair of moments LaPaz slipped on a pool of blood and died suddenly. Montejo and Vela were sweeping so widely in their parry and thrust that no other lancer ventured down the corridor and Adan fell back out of the way.

Behind Montejo, out past the mouth of the corridor, smoke began to rise in the center of the big house. Vela heard Adan mutter that the outside walls under Clara Sinombre's windows had also been fired. The blades leaped at their business. Montejo drove his sabre back and forth in sweeps which could have cut a man in half. Sweat trickled down into Vela's eyes, ran on down his cheeks and into the corner of his mouth. Smoke whirled more thickly through the corridor.

There seemed no end to it. Vela's head ached tormentingly and he was weakening rapidly. His opponent seemed gaining strength. Nowhere could the blue Toledo of Vela's rapier dart through the big man's able defense.

The smoke was very thick, half of the house was a raging inferno, and one of Montejo's men begged that they be ordered out of it. Montejo shouted him off in scorn. The lancers disappeared. It became plain that Montejo planned to hold Vela, his accomplices, and the girl in this part of the house until it was certain they would die in the flames. Vela crouched, seeking to ease his cramped legs.

Montejo took that crouch for a shift of position. He wheeled his sabre over his head, waiting for the shift to come. The brilliant speed with which the rapier darted forward was a stroke of masterly swordsmanship. To Vela it seemed ridiculously easy. His point went home, sliding through the thick body before him. He followed it through to the hilt, wrenched the weapon away, and staggered back. All of the violence and venom faded from Montejo's face. His sabre clattered to the floor. He raised surprised eyes, started to say something, and pitched forward.

Vela staggered back through the thick, billowing smoke to the door of Clara Sinombre's quarters. The far wall was a blistering sheet of flame. Fumbling along the floor, choking and retching, he found a limp figure, a figure which should have been light in his arms but which weighted him down like lead. He forced himself back into the corridor, down its length, and out into the central hall. The stairs were still intact, and racing up them came a company of men. One of these tried to take his burden from him, but he fought them off and jerked his head toward the room he had just quitted.

"Fonseca!" he muttered. "Adan! Overcome—"

The men rushed on, men in finery, men with famous names. Dona Clara's gentlemen of Potosi! They had come. She had sent for them! That was what she had meant when she begged him to fight only "a little longer."

And what kind of fools were they when they tried to take a girl from the arms of a Vela! In Galicia young men learn the use of a blade. They learn also that when duty is discharged is a time for love.

Vela sat quietly, sucking the fresh air of the thin night into his aching lungs and waiting for the girl snuggled against his chest to stir. He sat in the soft grass out in the park. She might hate him when she roused and saw her palace in flames. He didn't want her hatred, so he held her closely. After what seemed a long time, he looked down at her face. Astonished, he saw she had roused from her faint. But she wasn't looking over his shoulder at the roaring fire. She was looking up into his face. And in her eyes was a flame which outshone the pyre of her magnificence. He bent his head forward, meeting her parted lips.

"Mi mujer de plata!" he breathed. "My silver woman!"

Much later Clara Sinombre stirred in his arms and laughed softly upwards.

"They say silver is a cold metal and not fit for the hand of a man. But they lie, eh, Gustin Vela?"

"Ay! They lie before God!" Vela answered. And he bent his head again.

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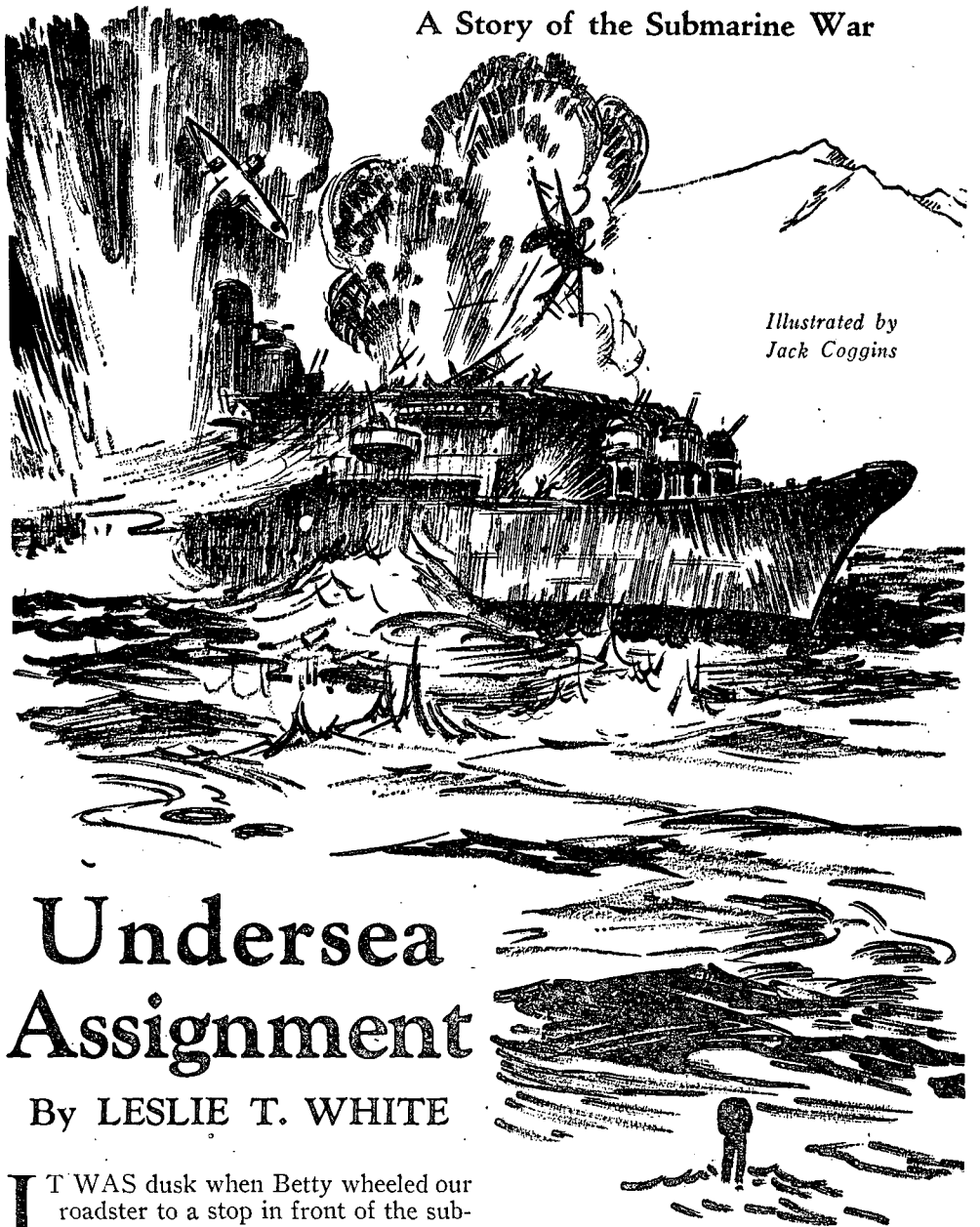
A Story of the Submarine War



Illustrated by Jack Coggins

Undersea Assignment

By LESLIE T. WHITE

IT WAS dusk when Betty wheeled our roadster to a stop in front of the submarine depot. I didn't see the skipper then, although he must have been there all the time. Betty and I just sat quietly. I lit a cigarette to be doing something.

"Well, Gus . . ." she began, then her voice trailed away. Goodbyes were always hard for us, especially this kind. Perhaps she remembered my long-ago promise to give up the Submarine Service. At the time, I had meant it. But that was before the war. Good submarine navigators were at a premium, so when I was called out of reserve for active duty, she did not complain.

She didn't say anything now, although she must have known the kind of a show this was going to be. I had not told her I had volunteered for special duty, but she is Navy-wise; she knows that when a special crew is called together, something unusual must be up.

I didn't know what to say either. I was

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anxious to get away for I was half afraid she might ask questions, and I'd never lied to her yet. So I climbed out of the car, retrieved my gear from the turtle-deck and walked around to her side.

"This is it, Kitten. I—" That's when I heard the skipper's footstep.

I was glad of the diversion. He acknowledged my salute, paused, and looked sharply at Betty sitting behind the wheel. He was a tall man with a slight stoop. He was older than most lieutenant commanders for he had been retired and then called back into service. I should say he was just over fifty. His hair was salt-and-peppered, and he had absolutely cold eyes.

I said, "Commander Ramsey—my wife."

Betty smiled and started to offer her slim little hand, but Ramsey merely bowed stiffly and, without speaking, swung on his heel and stalked away.

While I've had more than my share of sullen captains, it was hard to take in front of Betty. But she just laughed it off.

"He's preoccupied," she said, and reached her arms around my neck. "Come back to me, Gus. I—" She kissed me, tramped on the starter and drove away in a hurry. I just stood there until I was half through another cigarette, then I picked up my bag.

My nerve was at its lowest ebb when I stepped onto the slatted deck of the *Gorus*. She was long past the retirement age, having been commissioned originally in 1918. The *Alogon,* a pig-boat of the same litter, was moored directly abaft the *Gorus*.

They still were good boats for certain kinds of work. Because of their age and size they were incapable of long range duties, for they were only one hundred eighty-six feet long with a displacement of five hundred thirty tons—about half the length and less than a fifth the displacement of our largest submersibles. But their compactness made them quicker and easier to handle in crash dives, especially in shoal water, and their loss would not be as serious as that of a modern submarine. If this jaunt was half what I expected it was going to be, the force commander had likely taken that last factor into consideration when he chose the *Gorus* and the *Alogon* for special duty.

The executive officer, a genial youngster named Hunt, showed me where to stow my gear. Most of the thirty-man crew I knew by sight, and Barton, the diving officer, had served with me on the P-14.

BY the time I got back to the control room, Ramsey had come aboard and we were ready to shove off. He was going over the operations order, so I climbed onto the bridge for a last look at the weather. Long, wispy fingers of fog reached experimentally through the harbor mouth, and there was a nasty chop to the sea.

The *Alogon* skipper dropped onto our deck, and I was surprised and pleased to see he was Steve Twitchell. I'd served with Steve before, and liked him.

"I'll be damned! Gus Hibbs!" He laughed and shook hands warmly. "You going along?"

"I'm navigating the *Gorus.*"

He nodded, then stopped smiling as Commander Ramsey leaned over the rail.

"You ready?"

Steve touched his visor. "All ready, sir."

Ramsey grunted. "We'll proceed at once. Keep together until we clear land's end, then go your own way."

"Is that all?"

The undertone in Twitchell's voice surprised me. But if Commander Ramsey noticed the contentious tone, he chose to ignore it.

"Whichever one of us reaches the rendezvous first will wait until noon Wednesday. If the other fails to arrive by that time, he will then proceed to the objective as ordered, and do the best he can. Is that understood?"

"Perfectly!" snapped Steve Twitchell, and swung back to his own boat.

We eased out through the gap in single file, the *Gorus* in the lead. Ramsey ordered the boat trimmed down until her decks were awash; then he called young Hunt and me down into the control room.

He smoothed the operations order on a large chart. For several minutes he stared at it, gnawing on the mouthpiece of a cold briar.

"You've heard of the *Onsumi?*" he asked suddenly.

I had, of course. Hunt said, "You mean the enemy aircraft carrier our bombers sank last month, Captain?"

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Ramsey gave him a sour glance. "Nobody sank her, unfortunately. That's our assignment."

Hunt swallowed and looked at me. The captain pricked a spot on the chart with the point of his dividers.

"This is Sunday," he growled. "Allowing for a long submerged run during the daylight hours, we should reach Magda Island by dawn Wednesday. We have a rendezvous with the *Alogon*. Now . . ." He spread the dividers to span another tiny dot on the chart. "This is Guarani Island—our objective. Naval Intelligence believes the *Onsumi* uses the harbor on Guarani as a secret base. We haven't much information about the harbor itself save that it's a deep, natural basin with a narrow mouth. Now I don't need to tell either of you how important it is to be rid of that carrier. All we've got to do is ease into the harbor and blow her out of existence."

I could see now why the force commander had asked for volunteers for special duty. Young Hunt didn't.

"But won't they have a submarine net stretched across the harbor entrance, Captain?" he asked.

Ramsey permitted himself a thin smile. "Undoubtedly. That, my boy, is the purpose of *two* submarines." He saw that I understood, so leaving me to explain to Hunt, he went into his cabin.

I TOOK my course from the compass-rose on the chart and climbed to the bridge to relieve the watch. For awhile I was alone, smoking and trying not to think too much. It came to me abruptly that I was the only married man among the officers, perhaps even among the crew. But I couldn't complain; I'd asked for it.

After awhile Hunt climbed up onto the bridge. About that time the clouds lifted sufficiently for me to get a star sight. He waited until I had computed our position, then remarked off-handedly, "Looks like it's going to be some show. You got it figured out yet?"

"Only a rough guess."

"Let's hear it."

"Well, as I see it, one boat will have to be sacrificed to get rid of that net so the other can get inside to take care of the *Onsumi*."

He whistled softly. "I wonder which of us . . ."

"You'll have to ask the skipper about that," I told him.

He was quiet a long time. "I think I know," he mused finally. "Yes, sir—I think I understand." He came over and leaned on the rail beside me. "Well, I can see why they picked a guy like Mike Ramsey for the job."

"He's a damn good submarine man," I said. I didn't like the idea of discussing the captain with a junior officer.

"I take it you know Steve Twitchell pretty well," he remarked. "Know his girl, Ann Travers?"

"Only that he was going with her."

Hunt snorted. "Yes, and Steve's pretty crazy about her. It seems there's just one other guy in his way. I'll give you one guess."

"Not Ramsey?"

"None other. Michael Ramsey in the flesh."

That took the wind out of my sails. I don't know just why, for the Navy crowd is rather a close-knit group, but somehow I'd hardly expect a hard-bitten old veteran like Ramsey to be interested in the same sort of a girl that would attract a lively youngster like Steve Twitchell.

"Well, it's a coincidence they're assigned to this show," I commented.

"I'm not sure that it is," Hunt suggested.

"Take it easy, mister. After all, you're talking about your skipper, and that's a mighty blunt—"

"I don't care whether it's blunt or not!" the boy said harshly. "It's damned obvious Steve Twitchell isn't coming back from this show!"

"None of us may come back."

The lad was certainly upset about Steve. "You don't know what happened today," he growled, "or you'd probably feel the way I do about Ramsey." When I kept still, he went on: "Listen to this! When Ramsey and Steve left headquarters after getting their orders, both of them knew that Steve wasn't coming back. So Steve followed Ramsey over to his car and said he was going to say goodbye to Ann Travers, and asked Ramsey, under the circumstances, to stay away. You'll admit Steve was justified, won't you?"

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It would seem so, I thought. I shrugged.

Hunt sniffed disdainfully. "Yeah! And Steve no sooner got to his girl's house, when damned if old Ramsey didn't show up. Worse than that, he just hung around, staring at Ann until it was time for them both to leave. Steve almost had a fight over it once they got outside. He told the old geezer off plenty for spoiling his last date. Ramsey took it without a word."

"That hardly sounds like the skipper," I reasoned. "After all—"

"After all—*hell!* I got the story from the one guy who heard both arguments—Ramsey's own chauffeur."

WE were in hostile waters, so during most of the long daylight hours we ran submerged, "porpoising" or coming to the surface at intervals to insure us our course was being maintained. About an hour after sunrise Wednesday, we picked up our landfall.

The sea was glassy smooth, with a deep Pacific ground swell bulging underneath, and little Magda Island looked like an old green felt hat resting on a wide blue mirror. We broke surface and lay awash, with just the conning tower out of the water. In this trim we could make a crash dive if need arose. With every man on the alert, we gingerly groped our way into a perfect little cove.

The *Alogon* was lolling on the surface, charging her batteries. We put a hook down nearby, and signaled for Lieutenant Twitchell to come over in his boat.

Steve had already stationed lookouts ashore on the hills, so we brought up the charts and spread them on the bridge in the sunshine.

It must have been painful for both Steve and Ramsey to rehearse the plan. Young Hunt's face was the color of stale dough as he listened, and I know I felt woozy. Although it was Steve Twitchell's death being planned, strangely enough I had the most sympathy for Commander Ramsey. It is no small task to assign another man to sacrifice his life at any time, and under the present circumstances, I could only guess at what it must have cost Mike Ramsey. I wondered if he regretted spoiling Steve's last date.

The operations plan was brutally simple. The aircraft carrier *Onsumi* was a menace not only to our fleet and air-arm, but to our entire naval strategy in the Pacific. She was a wasps' nest that housed nearly a hundred vicious fighter planes. The only practical way of reaching her was by submarine.

It would have been obvious, even without the warning of Intelligence, that there would be a strong submarine net across the narrow entrance to the secret base at Guarani. Well, we were prepared. The *Alogon* was practically a five hundred ton torpedo in itself; so was the *Gorus,* for that matter. It was Steve Twitchell's job to blow the net and all appendages out of the way, and give Ramsey the opportunity to run the *Gorus* through the hole and empty her torpedo tubes into the *Onsumi* at point-blank range. It was a grim version of football play: The *Alogon* would take out the opposition, and the *Gorus* would carry the ball.

"You will leave here in time to reach the mouth at ten o'clock," Ramsey said. "We'll stand about ten minutes behind you. Now, there's always a chance you may be able to slide under the net or—" He stopped when he saw the thin, cold smile on Steve Twitchell's face.

"Well, I can only hope one of us gets the *Onsumi,*" he finished bitterly, and offered his hand.

Steve pretended not to see it. He saluted casually and swung onto the deck. Ramsey bit his lip and glanced my way. I tried to avoid his eyes, but I could feel the flush creep over my face.

WE lay in the cove until one o'clock, charging the batteries. There was a long submerged run ahead of us, and if by chance one of us survived the show, we'd need all the juice we could store up.

The *Alogon* passed through the gut at 13:06, and ten minutes later we followed. The midday heat had made an oven of the *Gorus,* and it was stifling when we submerged.

Ramsey drove the men hard all afternoon. He made them check over every valve, vent, every piece of checkable machinery. Nobody was given time to worry. I was proud of the way the men took it. They went about their jobs as if we were on a practice drill.

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At four o'clock we surfaced for a quick fix. It was a good thing we did because a deep current had set us nearly two miles off our course. I marked the fix on the chart and allowed for the set in a new course. The skipper watched me in glum silence.

"I hope Lieutenant Twitchell catches that set," I remarked idly.

Ramsey grunted. "Don't worry about Steve Twitchell. If there's a set there, he'll catch it." For a fleeting instant he acted as if he was going to say something else. Instead, he turned away.

We porpoised every hour after that, and at 18:07 we picked up Guarani Island through the periscope.

"Stop the motors," Ramsey ordered. "See if you can hear the *Alogon.*"

After a pause the listener reported. "Submarine up ahead. Bearing two zero, sir."

"Good enough," said Ramsey. "Go down to forty feet and follow her in at five knots."

Five knots was too fast. We cut down to four, then to three. It wouldn't do to be riding the *Alogon's* tail when she blew up.

"She's slowing, sir," reported the listener.

"Thirty feet! Stop all motors. Up periscope!" Ramsey swung the tube slowly around. "Down periscope. Two knots."

"It won't be long now," I said. My voice must have sounded a little hollow.

We held our course for eight minutes, then the listener announced propellers coming rapidly toward us on a bearing of one zero seven.

Ramsey took hold of the periscope handles. "Stop all motors. All tubes ready for firing. Stand by! Up periscope!" He stooped and rose with the tube.

There wasn't a sound in the control room. I guess we were all straining to sense what the skipper was seeing.

"Down periscope," he ordered. "Take her down to eighty feet."

As we sloped down to that depth, he nodded amiably to Hunt and me. "This looks promising, boys. A pair of fast destroyers are just coming out of the harbor."

When the listener reported the destroyers out of range, we went up to thirty feet for a last look. Ramsey followed the glass all the way around the horizon, then glanced at the listener.

"Hear anything?"

"Submarine just started its motors, sir."

Ramsey took another look. "Down periscope. Right rudder two degrees. Take her down slowly to sixty feet. Steady, now."

IT might have been a practice drill on our own grounds. The diving officer stood as calm as always behind the men

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at the controls, his eyes on the depth gauges. Young Hunt studied the chart. Suddenly I was aware that the skipper was watching me.

"You did a nice piece of navigating to hit her right smack on the nose, Hibbs," he said.

I guess my mouth sagged open in surprise. Before I could think of a reply, he walked over to the listener and took the hydrophones himself. He cocked his head, listening. After a couple of minutes, he turned the phones back and went over to the chart. He glanced from his wristwatch to the tachometer, then back to his watch.

"This is it," he announced grimly. "Secure the torpedo tubes."

I knew what he had in mind. He didn't want to bump the sensitive snouts of our torpedoes.

"Take her down slowly," he ordered. "There's supposed to be sandy bottom at ninety feet. Easy, now."

The diving officer flooded the main tanks and we sank by the nose. I braced myself, straining to hear the explosion that would mean our passage was cleared. Finally we scraped lightly and came to rest on the bottom.

"Stop all motors!"

We watched the listener.

"Submarine proceeding dead ahead, sir."

We lay like a dead thing on the sand. My legs grew cramped, but I didn't dare move. Finally Ramsey walked over to the listener.

"What do you hear now?"

"She's almost faded away, sir!"

"Did she stop her motors?"

"No, sir. She maintained her speed and course until she passed out of range, sir."

Ramsey scowled as if he distrusted the information. He turned to the chart, and after consulting his watch, measured off a distance with the dividers.

He looked up abruptly. "By God! He's through!" he growled. "He's wormed right into the harbor!"

Hunt gulped. "But—the net?"

Ramsey gave him a sardonic smile. 'Perhaps there is no net. Perhaps it's mined instead. Well, we'll try our luck. Take her up to forty feet."

You could cut the tension with a knife. Ramsey was a human rock, braced against the periscope handles.

"Stop motors. Up periscope! Down periscope. Steady as she goes."

I found it difficult to breathe. Where was the net? Had enemy Intelligence learned of our adventure? Were we groping our way into a death trap like some blind animal?

Something had to be wrong! If this was the carrier's secret base, it would have to be guarded up to the hilt. Would we hit a mine? Or were the terrier-like destroyers waiting to lay their pattern of eggs around us?

The Old Man felt it, too. Although his seamed face was as blank and inscrutable as ever, I could see the tiny globules of moisture condensed on his forehead.

"Two knots!" he commanded quietly. "Take her up to thirty. All tubes ready for firing! Easy, now. Up periscope. Down periscope! By heaven, boys—*we're in!*"

"All tubes ready for firing, sir," reported the chief torpedo man.

"Stand by. We'll have another look," said the captain. "Stop all motors. Up periscope." He rose with the glass. "Hold it there!"

He focused swiftly and surveyed the entire horizon. There wasn't a sound save the click of the gyrocompass. Finally Ramsey broke the silence. "Down periscope!" He moved to the chart and with parallel rules fixed our position in the harbor. Then he made four crosses on the chart.

"There's a light cruiser on a bearing of seven zero five," he announced quietly, "with three destroyers moored together in front of her." He chuckled. "I could get the three of them in one good shot."

Young Hunt couldn't restrain his curiosity. "But did you see the *Onsumi,* Captain?"

The Old Man shook his head. "She's not in the harbor," he admitted. "Obviously that's why the net was gone. But we'll wait for her. Those destroyers were probably on the way to escort her in. Meanwhile, we'll slide down the bay." He read the course off the chart, then aside to me, remarked: "Twitchell will be waiting for us."

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THE outline of the harbor was shown on the chart by dotted lines which indicated that the survey, insofar as our government was concerned, was incomplete. The harbor was shaped like an hour-glass, with an inner and outer basin. The outer harbor, where the cruiser lay, had an average depth of twelve fathoms, but the inner basin was sketchy and shallow. The course the Old Man had called for was going to stand us through the narrow neck into the back basin.

The listener announced suddenly: "Submarine ahead! Bearing two zero, sir."

Ramsey nodded. "Good work!" I knew he was referring to Steve. "Take her up to thirty feet. Secure the torpedo tubes. Two knots."

We slid into deep water almost at once.

"Up periscope!" Ramsey ordered. "Good. Take her up. Secure the air."

As we surfaced, he pushed open the hatch and climbed into the conning tower. The sudden rush of cool fresh air was intoxicating after the unbearable stuffiness of the long afternoon. I followed him onto the bridge. We had only the smallest possible portion of the conning tower out of water.

Ramsey swept the horizon with his glasses. "The *Onsumi's* coming, Hibbs."

"Can you see anything of her, sir?"

"No, but I can *feel* it," he said, without turning. "You know, Hibbs, it's strange how these things work out sometimes. We expected it was going to cost us one submarine to get in here. But now we have both our boats, and we may get not only the carrier, but a cruiser to boot. That's good hunting, my boy."

"I'm certainly glad," I said, "for Steve Twitchell's sake, as well as our own."

He turned as if he had not heard me, and went below. The diving officer and quartermaster came up to relieve me. When I climbed down into the control room, the skipper was laughing and rubbing his hands.

"Well," he chuckled, looking from Hunt to me. "You lads ought to be good and hungry by this time, eh?"

Young Hunt blinked. "Hungry?"

"That's what I said," said Ramsey. He looked around at the Filipino steward.

"Chicken, maybe?" suggested the steward. "Very good, Captain."

"Chicken it is then," laughed the captain. "See that there's lots of it, Pete."

Ramsey was in excellent humor when we sat down in our crowded quarters, but I noticed that young Hunt did not touch his food. I don't think he was scared; he was just young and the excitement absorbed all his nervous energy. The Old Man went at his food like a wolf.

We had barely started when the quartermaster stuck his head down the hatch. "Something off the starboard quarter. I believe it's the *Alogon,* sir."

A moment later the listener reported the beat of Diesels.

Ramsey chuckled. "Steve's a wise youngster. He's taking no chances."

Again the quartermaster ducked down. This time he had trouble suppressing his excitement. "A large vessel, convoyed by destroyers, is coming through the gap into the outer harbor, sir!"

"Very good. Get back up there and keep your eye on her."

Young Hunt glanced at me. He was bug-eyed with anxiety. The captain leaned back and filled his pipe.

"Well, Hunt, how do you like submarine duty now?" he asked.

I felt sorry for the boy. "I guess I like it fine, sir," he stammered.

"That's good," the Old Man said kindly. "You've got the makings of a good skipper."

Hunt flushed scarlet, but Ramsey turned to me. "You're married, Hibbs. How did you get on this special duty job?"

He rose abruptly and clambered up the ladder. Hunt looked at me.

"S'help me, Gus—am I going crazy, or is he?"

WHEN we reached the bridge, Ramsey was staring into the darkness. Barton was saying, "You can't see her now, sir, but she's almost directly across the bay from the cruiser. I had a good look at her silhouette when she came through the gap. I believe it's the *Onsumi,* sir."

None of the rest of us could distinguish anything, but Commander Ramsey seemed to be seeing the whole layout.

Barton added reluctantly: "I'm afraid the net's back in place, sir. I could see the tugs working across the mouth after the carrier came in."

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"I expected it would be," the captain said briskly. "Get over a boat. I want to send a message to Lieutenant Twitchell."

He ducked below. A few minutes later, he sent for me. He was just finishing a note as I came down.

"Hibbs, I want you to personally deliver this note to Steve Twitchell," he said brusquely. "Take young Hunt with you, and make certain that Twitchell clearly understands the maneuver as I've outlined it here. The original plan was to sacrifice the *Alogon,* ordered by the force commander, but the temporary absence of the net made that plan obsolete and places the full responsibility of successfully completing the mission on my shoulders. So at midnight exactly, I want the *Alogon* to release its first torpedo at the *Onsumi,* and follow with as many more as possible. The *Gorus* will handle the cruiser. Impress on Twitchell that he is to leave the destroyers alone. Is that clear now?"

"Yes, sir. And then—"

He slipped the note into an envelope and handed it to me. "Twitchell will know what to do when his job is done. Get going now."

He didn't come up onto the bridge again, so Hunt and I climbed onto the small boat and pulled over to the *Alogon.* Steve was waiting, and I gave him Ramsey's note. We went below, and he read it twice. I rather expected he would hand it around so we could discuss the orders, but he only said, "Well, I'll be damned!" and shoved it into his pocket.

We crowded around his chart and laid out our courses. Steve marked the run the *Alogon* would take to get into position for a close, point-blank shot at the carrier, full on the beam.

"The net is back across the harbor mouth," volunteered Bill Hunt. "Those destroyers will sure boil up the water with their ash-cans."

"To hell with the destroyers!" Steve snapped at him.

Hunt blushed. It took me by surprise, too, for it didn't sound like Steve Twitchell. Before anything more could be said, the lookout reported that the *Gorus* had vanished.

I scrambled onto the bridge, unable to credit the information. But it was true. The *Gorus* was gone!

"You'll just have to go along with us," Steve said shortly. "Ramsey couldn't wait any longer." He dismissed the matter and ordered the diving alarm set off. "Take her down to thirty feet," he instructed his diving officer.

We were forgotten.

WE cleared the bar as smooth as silk and glided into the outer harbor. Steve took another quick look through the periscope, then ordered it down.

"Get all tubes ready for firing! Depth setting thirty feet. Left rudder five degrees." As the helmsman brought her on the new course, he called, "Steady now. Steady as she goes."

I figured we must be nearly there when Steve upped the periscope again.

"Full right rudder," he ordered softly. "That's it. Steady. Down periscope. Two knots."

He straightened and looked at me. "Perfect, Gus. We've got our nose dead on her beam. I'm going to give her all four tubes."

"That ought to do it," I said.

He nodded. "If it doesn't, we still carry a sting in our tail."

I watched him closely. Somehow, he seemed to have changed. Perhaps the importance of our mission had marked him. It was no exaggeration to say that the course of history would be influenced by the success or failure of our task.

"Stop all motors!" We drifted until our way was lost. "Up periscope!" From his smile, I knew he had the *Onsumi* squarely on the wires. "Down periscope. What time is it, Gus?"

"23:58. Two minutes to go!"

"Everything ready?"

"One minute to go!" I told him.

"All tubes ready for firing, sir," announced the chief torpedo man.

"Start motors."

I found myself cutting off the seconds. Steve gripped the periscope handles.

"Stand by to fire!" he commanded. "Up periscope!"

The ship's clock began to chime.

"Fire One!"

I braced myself.

"Fire Two! Left rudder ten degrees!"

Before the *Alogon* swung over, we felt the impact of a terrific explosion. Several

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lights were jarred out, and I realized how desperately close Steve had brought us to his target.

"Fire Three!" he barked. "Stop the starboard motor. Right rudder twenty degrees!"

The second and third torpedoes hit before we had completed our arc. I was afraid the jar would sheer the rivets on our skin.

"Fire Four! Stand by to dive!"

"Destroyers coming, sir!" cried the listener.

"Let 'em . . ." The last of Steve's remark was lost in the dull jar as the fourth torpedo blew her way into the great hull of the carrier. The backwash caught us broadside and we heeled sharply.

"Down periscope! Take her down to fifty feet! Reload all tubes!"

"A torpedo just went off across the harbor, sir!" the listener reported. "There goes another one, sir!"

"Mike Ramsey's completed his mission," Steve said huskily.

HE called for two knots and we crept ahead, our boat trimmed level at forty feet. Steve's plan was daring. Instead of flight, he meant to creep up under the very bow of the dying carrier and lay there like a ferret in a henhouse while the hounds searched the yard.

Even without the listener's reports we could hear the destroyers tearing madly back and forth across the harbor, and the water commenced to boil as they laid their pattern of depth charges. We were in danger of being shaken to the surface, so Twitchell ordered us down another thirty feet. Then he walked over and stood behind the listener.

"Hear anything beside those ash-cans?"

"No, sir." Then: "The carrier's gone down, sir! I heard her boilers explode!"

"Very good. Anything else?"

"Not yet, sir."

I wondered what else he expected to hear. The *Onsumi* was down. So was the cruiser. Trust Mike Ramsey for that. The depth charges were slackening, and only the fact that we lay so close to the stricken carrier saved us. I knew without seeing it how the black, oily surface of the harbor would be criss-crossed with searchlights so that a sardine would not dare float to the top. We could hear the destroyers zig-zagging, hoping for the chance to ram us if we were blown to the surface. There would be no quarter.

But we had accomplished our objective. We'd sunk the dreaded carrier and her brood of hawks, and we'd got a light cruiser for good measure. The cost was cheap enough—a couple of over-age pig-boats. They hadn't got us yet, but the net was down, and there was no escape.

"An explosion, sir!" cried the listener. "Too heavy for an ash-can. Bearing about three zero five, sir!"

Steve Twitchell looked very tired. He brushed his hand across his eyes and turned to the periscope.

"Start motors," he ordered wearily. "Hold her at forty feet. Full speed."

"How about the net, Captain?" asked young Bill Hunt.

Steve glared. "There is no more net!"

* * *

Of course we could all make a pretty fair guess at what happened, but it wasn't until the last night of the homeward trip that Steve called me into his tiny cabin and without comment handed me the note. I recognized Mike Ramsey's handwriting at once.

It was brusque and official—I could almost imagine Commander Ramsey growling out the words himself. In his plodding style he had written in detail his orders for Steve to sink the *Onsumi*. The *Gorus*, he wrote, would dispatch the cruiser with her stern tubes and then blow the submarine net out of the way for the *Alogon's* escape. Up to that point the letter was coldly official, but what his intention was he made plain by the following:

I'm sending over the only two men I can spare. Hunt will make a good officer one of these days, and Hibbs is married.

But it was the postscript that got me. For old Mike Ramsey had written:

P. S.: By the way, Steve, who spoiled whose last date?

A Stirring Short Story of the War at Sea **by Max Brand** **In the July Argosy**

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KNOCKOUT DROPS

By JOEL REEVE

Illustrated by Carl Pfeufer

He was sweating, although it was cool in the park.

Stack Wilson was dumb—but durable

STACK WILSON poked out a left arm which rippled with fine muscles and wore a red glove upon its fist, but was otherwise of little pugilistic account. The fist made slight contact with the bobbing head of Red Bunting, who came snorting and lunging in close, whaling both hands to Stack's washboard middle. Stack floundered on the ropes, puzzledly seeking his balance.

From Stack's corner, Charlie Reed yelled, "Stall him, you big palooka!"

Stack was, as usual, getting his ears beat down. This was the Garden, this was important stuff. The winner was to get a shot at Potsy Malone. With the Champ retired for the duration, the heavyweight eliminations were on. Red Bunting, on his way up, avid for glory and shekels, was very earnest.

Stack grinned foolishly, failing to clinch, taking his lumps. He had a nice grin. He was black-haired, not handsome. His left ear did not match his right ear. His left hand did not know what his right hand was doing. He was a big guy and he could catch them, and people liked to see him perform. He was a stooge for up-

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and-coming boxers like Red Bunting and Potsy Malone.

There was exactly one minute of the fifth round to go. Red Bunting's hard hands played a tattoo, and Stack began to hurt a little inside him. He pawed Red away with that awkward left and looked inquiringly at his corner.

Charlie Reed was thinner than gas rationing. He wore the bags of jaundice under both eyes. He was six and a half feet long, but curled over to ordinary height as though there was a hinge in his chest. He groaned audibly and made motions with his right fist.

Potsy Malone himself was present, with Muley Mantz, the Mite Manager. Between them, a blond vision in an ermine wrap over a white, spangled evening dress stared thoughtfully up at the gladiators upon the glaring canvas. Charlie spared them a glance, recognized Lucy Blossom, and groaned again at the complications of his feeble existence. Lucy eyed Stack as though he were a sacrificial victim to a worthy cause.

Red, a bit arm-weary from punching at his opponent, stepped back for a breather, his hands high, his guard scientifically perfect, still bobbing his round head. Stack moved forward, plodding like the Red Army. Stack's left again made that fly-slapping motion. Red dropped his right glove to counter.

The right hand of Stack Wilson lay peacefully upon his wide chest. At Red's attempt, this fist seemed to come out of a catapult. It flicked in the impersonal glare of the lights. It was like the gentle spat of a cat's paw against a paper tied to a piece of string.

The blow landed against Red Bunting's perfect guard. It was muffled by the protection of Red's gloved hand. Yet, as the gallery gods finally stood and yelled, Red Bunting staggered back two steps, his confidence and aplomb in ruins about him.

Stack winked down at Charlie Reed. He stepped in again. He flung out the right hand once more. He connected with Red Bunting's inferior maxillary.

The sandy-haired fighter turned suddenly pale. His eyes crossed, his knees went buttery, his uncertain feet strayed from the pathway of the victory he had almost earned. He groped blindly, trying to resume the battle, trying to locate the enemy.

Stack was walking for the neutral corner, chin on shoulder, peering apologetically. The gallery was screaming now. The filberts on the shelf were always with Stack. Red wavered to the ropes above his own corner, tried to grasp them. He missed and sat down upon his pants, like a comic drunk. He spread his hands, seeking sustenance; then he collapsed at full length.

JOEY BLOW, the referee, raised Stack's right arm and said respectfully, "That was a good one, Stack. Better than the one did for Maxie—or Lou!"

Stack spat out his mouthpiece and said, "Thank you, Joey. Do you think I have got a chance against Potsy Malone, Joey?"

"No," answered the referee. "He will kill you before you hit him with that right duke."

"I am very sorry to hear you say that, Joey," Stack said wildly. "Potsy has moved in on my gal. I would love to eliminate Potsy."

The cops were holding off Stack's myriad admirers and Charlie was coming with the robe.

Stack kept trying to see Lucy, frowning a little. Even to his simple mind, the combination of Lucy and Potsy and Muley held forth much over which to ponder. Lucy was always smart. Lucy and Charlie Reed. Stack was the dumb one.

He caught one glimpse of her blond head between the shoulders of the two men. She turned and waved, smiling like an angel. Stack began to feel happy.

Then they were in the dressing room and Charlie barred even the reporters. Stack beamed, awaiting praise.

Charlie's voice bit at him: "So you won't throw the right hand unless you are hurt! You are afraid you might stir up someone's brain-pan! You dumb, clumsy disgrace to the boxing profession! Potsy Malone will cut you to little bits. Look at you! That palooka almost ruined what was left of your pan!"

"Aw," said Stack. "Aw! I'll catch that Potsy. Fifteen rounds I got, haven't I? I'll catch him—once."

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"In five rounds," said Charlie bitterly, "before you warm up, he will knock you colder than Siberia."

"I wish I was in Siberia," said Stack, his happiness all gone now. "If the Air Corps would have taken me, maybe I would be there now, fighting with the Reds."

"The Air Corps—the Army—the Navy—will you stop groaning about guns and think of boxing?" howled Charlie.

"Boxing—pah!" said Stack. "Just because I have got flat feet and a couple teeth out and do not see so good since that Lagento thumbed me in 1938 . . . I could be some use to them!"

Charlie said, "Maybe Uncle Sam does not want a trambo who cannot even lick Potsy Malone! Look, Stack—I am your pal, and you know it. Won't you, just for me, learn to use that left a little? Maybe it's my fault—I never thought you'd get this high and I didn't insist on it. Maybe I am a heel. In the past I have been lots of things. But I want you to get this big chance. If you lick Potsy, you'll be tops next to nobody, with Louis out. You've been rejected by the Army—and everyone else. Please, Stack, will you pay attention to me during this training grind?"

Stack said, "You are not a heel, Charlie. You are my pal. And I will try. I will work hard, honest. But this war—could I try the Marines again?"

"No!" said Charlie. "No! No! No!"

"Okay, Charlie," said Stack. "Go along, pal. I gotta see how Red's gettin' along. I hit him awful hard."

LUCY and Potsy Malone and Muley Mantz sat around the table in the Curfew Club. Potsy was one of those new type lads, smooth and big and strong and clever. Muley of the pushed-in, bulldog face, was sharper than two tacks. Lucy looked frail and helpless between them. Potsy put his hand over Lucy's and said, "You don't think he'd cross us, do you, Beautiful?"

Lucy said, "I've known those two since high school days. Stack was the big fullback—he still is. Charlie Reed played quarterback and gave Stack the signals twice on each play. Charlie was very smart. Stack was very dumb. And even before Charlie's health cracked and he went to Saranac, he would steal his grandmother's beads."

"Imagine that Reed playing football!" scoffed Potsy. "If he closes one eye he looks like a needle!"

"He was a great quarterback," said Lucy in a low voice. "He knew more than the coach."

"A goniff is always a goniff," said Muley sententiously.

"Charlie was a good guy," said Lucy. She shook her head.

Through a side door came a shambling figure. The waiters arranged a screen in the corner, so that no one should see the manager of Stack Wilson with these three. Charlie stood a moment, staring at Lucy. Then he sat down and the waiter brought whiskey.

Charlie said, "I don't like this, Lucy."

"Drink up, chum," said Muley. "It ain't nobody's funeral."

"No?" Charlie did not take his eyes from the girl. "It could be. If I go to jail, I'll die."

Lucy's voice was hard. "Don't get mellow, Charlie. I've got the evidence right here to tie you in with the policy racket. You'll go to jail all right, if I say so."

Charlie said, "That was three years ago. . ."

"It's still good!" said the girl. "Stack can't win, anyway. We're only protecting against that right hand he throws around careless. Potsy might send him over the hill to the whacky house. If the fight ends quickly and painlessly, Stack does not get smacked punchy by Potsy and nobody is hurt."

"This little bottle," said Muley Mantz, "contains a gaseous stuff. Quick, like when you go to the dentist, eh? Under Stack's nose, say before the fifth, Reed. One or two whiffs, and he comes out with his chin open. Poof! He is out, you win the bets you will undoubtedly make—everyone is happy!"

"I come out fast in the sixth, see?" said Potsy quickly. "Stack is okay, only his reflexes are bad. One wallop, Charlie. I promise you."

"You can easily clean up ten thousand," said Lucy in her hard, clipped voice. Charlie had never heard her like this before, even when she was bawling him out. She seemed hard as the diamond on her

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finger—a diamond Stack had given her.

Charlie said, "Or else, huh?"

"Or else Sing Sing—and that funeral," snapped Lucy.

Charlie said, "Yeah. I see. You got me, all right, pal." He picked up the vial. He still had not glanced at Muley or his fighter. His deep-set eyes were still upon the girl. "I thought I had been a great rat. I've been selfish, thoughtless about Stack's future. But I never kicked it around for dough. It took you to think that up. Don't ever speak to me again, will you, Lucy? Please!"

He walked out. The bottle was in his pocket. The girl sat watching him, her eyes level. Muley said, "You are doing the right thing, Lucy. Potsy could kill that Stack. But why should we take chances with it? That right hand. . ."

"Yes," said Lucy. "I am doing the right thing. Oh, yes!"

TRAINING at the Jersey beach resort was Stack's idea, and Charlie had concurred, thinking helplessly that it made no difference now. Stack played with the boys from the nearby Signal Corps station, and Charlie probed deep within himself.

It had been growing within him for all the time since Saranac. He had spent many days thinking how he had exploited Stack Wilson. When Stack's savings had sent him away in comfort, when Stack's simple missives had carried cheer to him daily, when Stack had gone ahead, fighting anyone, just to get money so that Charlie could make his battle for health, something had changed within the lean, sardonic manager. It was like a tumor melting away, so that when Charlie came out, he knew he had to make it all up.

He had fattened on Stack since high school days. Now, he had thought, it was time to repay. So he'd taken a fling at the rackets and made enough money to rehabilitate himself, to start Stack on the way up. That was all he knew. He had confessed to Lucy, and he was not sorry he had done it—but he was crucified to think Lucy had turned rat.

He had also tried to get Stack to use his left hand for other than an ornament. He had tried, but it was too late. That was something he should have done in the beginning, when Stack was learning. Charlie, without the true mechanics of boxing, would never spend the money on a good trainer in those unregenerate days. Charlie, he admitted to himself, had laid the foundations for this debacle to come.

He sat alone and asked himself if he was all bad. He could not believe it. He, Charlie Reed, was a clever fellow, always fighting to get ahead, using whatever methods were at hand to gain an end. But he was not bad. He was almost sure of that.

He thought about Stack. He thought about Potsy Malone and that sharp left hand. Lucy had said it was all the same, that Stack would get whipped anyway. Charlie sat and tried to make himself believe this and all that came out of it was that Stack was entitled to his chance, untrammeled by sinister bottles which gave off gaseous fumes. . . .

Lucy came to the camp. She hung on to Stack like a leech, Charlie thought bitterly, even when she was crossing him. She came in a big car, with a chauffeur, and asked to see Charlie. He went to her and said dully, "I don't want to talk to you. I told you. . ."

She said, "You've got that vial safe?"

He tapped his vest pocket. He said, "Nuts. Can't you even ask how Stack's going?"

"How is he?"

"He loves you to death, in his quiet way! He also thinks I am wonderful. It is just a big, happy family," said Charlie.

He turned on his heel and went in search of Stack. He was remembering when Lucy had been the high school belle, and how she had followed them to New York and made the grade so quickly with her low-pitched, torch-carrying voice. She had always been Stack's girl. There had been a time when Charlie resented that. There had been a time when he was in love with Lucy himself. He hated her now, he told himself, as he had never hated anything or anyone.

HE FOUND Stack in the cottage, and a Captain Bowman had brought over a radio set for Stack to play with, and a couple of looeys and an enlisted man or two were watching. There were gadgets strewn all over the floor, and Stack was saying happily, "I'll have it in a minute.

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It's a sort of hobby of mine. I am building a high fidelity set with an old fifteen and a half inch speaker I have got and some parts from other sets. Can't get new parts, you know! Priorities!" He grinned at them and made deft motions with his big hands.

Charlie said, "Am I paying sparring partners to eat candy on the board walk or to box with you? Lucy is here. . ."

"Lucy?" Stack's grin threatened his ears. "Oh, boy! Lucy! I will be right with you, Charlie." His hands sped and radio parts slid magically into place. Wires spliced, then Stack's head went into the box, a screwdriver turned and soap opera squawked from the speaker. "There! I knew it would work all right!"

Captain Bowman, a gray-haired, chisel-faced man said, "Hmmm. I see! Sergeant Samson was right."

"Great guy, the Sarge," said Stack. "Used to box a little. Never could use his left, though!" He nodded and went trotting to the practice ring.

He was terrible, training. He fell around and looked like the worst tyro. He had no style, no skill with the boxing. He played like a bumbling puppy. Charlie watched, begging for the left, and there was a real trainer this time, Toby More, who strove until sweat dropped off him.

Charlie groaned. Stack was honorable, generous, good—all the things a weak, clever boy aspired to be. He was a laughing, loyal giant, going to his betrayal like Samson before him. And at the ringside sat Lucy, blond and smiling.

Stack flung a short right at Toby, pulled it, missed and almost fell out of the wing. A Signal Corps pal howled, "That's okay, Stack old boy! Save them for Potsy!"

The Signal Corps knew nothing about boxing, Charlie thought. He supposed everyone in the station had his month's pay on Stack, their buddy. It was all a miserable, horrible mess. Stack finished the workout and clambered down and sat all bundled up, holding Lucy's hand while the soldiers cheered and asked for autographs. Charlie went away and walked beside the ocean.

He walked a mile down and a mile back, and as dusk gathered, he almost ran headlong into the girl. He said, "What do you want with me? Haven't you done enough?"

She held onto him a moment to steady herself in the sand. They were very close together, and Charlie remembered for a moment that once he had loved her very much indeed, and his wretchedness was complete. Then she drew back and looked up at his lean height and said, "Don't hate me too much, Charlie. You saw—oh, play it out! You've been pretty rotten, too, sometimes. If I could have trusted you, Charlie. . . "

He said, "You could have, but you'll never believe that. Let it go, Lucy. I took the vial. But I never said I'd use it. You may still have a chance to send me to jail, Lucy. Remember that!"

She stared at him a moment, and he awaited her threats. But she just turned and ran over the sand and was gone and that was the last he saw of her until the night of the bout with Potsy Malone.

AT THE ringside there was the usual pushing and hauling and scrambling about with Army and Navy dignitaries falling over pugs and racketeers and boxing commissioners, for this was a Service Organization gate and everyone was there. Somewhere in the vast crowd organized cheers from the Signal Corps bayed forth, shouting Stack Wilson's name in cadence as Charlie parted the ropes for the big guy to crawl through.

Across the ring Mantz looked wise and smug. Potsy was trim, tanned and fit, bowing to ringsiders in lofty disdain, winking at the experts who had made him two-to-one favorite.

Muley came over, inspected the bandages and let his beady eyes roam to Charlie's corner. The small vial with the wide snout perched among the bottles. Muley's nose wrinkled in pleased anticipation.

Stack said politely, "I hope Potsy is feeling good tonight."

"Potsy will murder you like he has stolen your gal," said Mantz unpleasantly.

Stack flushed and looked down for the spot where Lucy sat, to reassure himself. She was in the exact center of the third row, over on Stack's right. She wore sombre black and she was alone. Only the blob of lipstick relieved the stark pallidity of her face. She nodded gravely at Stack,

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and did not seem to be paying any attention at all to Potsy's waving gloves.

Charlie Reed observed all this. He suffered through the usual preliminaries. When there were only a few seconds left he stood on the apron and looked at Stack's open, battered, honest face.

He said, "You got to throw that right, chum. It is your only chance. He moved in on Lucy. He—he is no good. Hit him, won't you, kid?"

Stack said, "Everything will be all right, Charlie. Do not worry. . . Did you hear the boys from Monmouth? Captain Bowman is here, too! He likes me, Captain Bowman does!"

"Everyone likes you, you big dope," choked Charlie. "Hold your left high. I know you can take it, Stack. But he's tough and he's cruel. Hit him with the right, won't you?"

"You are a very good guy," said Stack. "It will be all right."

The whistle blew and Charlie had to get down. Stack pulled at the ropes, looking down, giving his entire attention to Charlie for the moment. He said simply, "You do not look good, Charlie. Stop worrying. We will collect our dough and you will get all well completely and we will join something together, maybe, if they will have us."

Charlie said, "Huh?" The bell rang on his stark amazement and he was alone with his conscience.

Potsy slid out quickly, leading with a sharp left, fiddling stylishly, staying at long range. He landed three times without a return, but lightly. Stack stood up straight and looked bad. He went in, stumbled over his own feet and was tied up easily by Potsy.

Nevertheless, Potsy dared not go all out, Charlie thought. Putting the fight in the bag for the fifth meant that Potsy could only sharpshoot at Stack's head. Muley's shifty little eyes were anxious. Anything could go wrong, and they knew it in the other corner. Charlie pounded his fist on the apron.

Potsy checked in with hooks to the body. Stack fought back, missing with a right which was not sharp enough, leaning a weak left in his first attempt with that hand. Potsy boxed, broke ground and walked contemptuously away and Stack plodded after him, slowly, inexorably.

Potsy called a couple of shots, timing himself to stay away from counters. He was boxing well, and his fists were hard enough to cut. The round went by.

CHARLIE worked silently over his charge. Toby More was tight-lipped, shaking his head. Charlie said, "Fight him, kid. He can box your ears off."

"Listen to those Signal Corps boys," Stack smiled. "Charlie, if you and me could get into something. . ."

"You're nuts!" Charlie said sharply. "I'm 4F, myself. Will you fight this guy?"

The fight went on. In the third, Stack slipped and Potsy got a couple of free shots. A left sliced open Stack's eye. Potsy smelled the blood and began hammering. A dozen rights and lefts pumped into Stack's body and a right nearly floored him. Potsy backed away and for a moment Charlie thought the triple cross was on and Stack was going bye-bye.

But Muley was squealing in fear. Muley had bet on the fifth, all right. Stack recovered himself and fought a little. Potsy took it on the lam. Stack lasted the round.

In the fourth, Potsy readied it up. He lambasted Stack at will. The big guy couldn't seem to untrack. Charlie bent over, aching with the punishment Stack was taking. Somehow Stack stumbled through it, somehow the bell finally rang.

Charlie climbed up swiftly, easing Stack to his stool. He bent down, ostentatiously taking the wide-mouthed vial into his right hand. He let Toby use the sponge and collodium. He talked.

He said, "Stack! Listen to me. He will come out fast in the fifth. For the finish, Stack! Will you sock him?"

Stack said foolishly, "He is too smart, Charlie. If we collect the loser's end, we can still get you well and get us into something. I got a secret, Charlie."

"Look, kid!" Charlie leaned close, his face twisted, pleading. "Will you go out and throw the right? Will you?"

Stack said, "Aw sure, Charlie. Anything for you, pal. You're my pal, ain't you?"

"If I'm not—I'm nothing in this world," said Charlie.

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He uncorked the wide-mouthed vial, standing sideways so that Muley could see him. He put it under Stack's nose. He held it there as Stack inhaled deeply.

Behind him a voice called up, "Stack! Look at me!"

Stack turned around, bewildered, hearing the familiar voice. Lucy had run down the aisle, every eye upon her. She called, "Stack! Get him, Stack! I love you! I truly love you, baby!"

Stack said, "Gee! My pal and my gal! Gee!"

The bell cut across them, dinning into Charlie's ears. He was sweating, although it was cool in the park. His eyes bulged out of his head. Lucy, behind him, crouched in the aisle, her hands together as though in prayer.

Stack was going out. But from the other corner Potsy was leaping like a wild man, his right drawn back, his left seeking to prop Stack into position. Potsy was chain lightning and his right hand flashed, booming on Stack's jaw.

At that precise moment the short, inside thrust of Stack Wilson's own starboard glove dipped down. It hit into the neck, where Potsy's shoulder joined, and it seemed to sink through.

Stack flew sideways, hit the ropes, did a couple of twirls on his feet, slid to his haunches.

Potsy seemed to go into the ring floor. His seat bounced once, twice. The very impetus of the blow bounced him back upon his feet and his fighting instinct drove him forward.

They met on the ropes and their arms flailed without science, two big men brawling. They both went down, got up. The crowd was bellowing with delight.

POTSY was smart. He regained his senses, fought loose. He staggered to ring center, dangerous as a cornered cougar. He ducked, weaving, looking for an opening. Stack, straight-backed, bleeding but fearless, walked in. His right was poised like a hammer over his shoulder. He dropped the left with no skill. Potsy avoided it and countered.

Stack did not attempt to evade the blow. He took it right on the head, as he took the other blows which came with it. He walked in, holding that right high.

Potsy broke and ran. Around and around he went. He hadn't lost a round and there was no reason for hurry—except the money they had bet that this was the round. But Muley was howling, and Potsy had seen Lucy run to Stack's corner. He stopped retreating, shot out the left again and moved to attack.

Stack waved his left hand impatiently. He tore through Potsy's skill, like a beast of the jungle, oblivious to pain. He tore at Potsy's head with the right glove.

The blow landed high. It was never a kayo punch. It just blew Potsy off his feet, like a big wind. It sent him through the ropes, flattened him on the apron.

The Signal Corps was counting in unison, "H'one, two, three, four—*h'one,* two, three, four. . ."

Potsy got up. He was not strong and his eyes were glassy, but he had, after all, the heart of a fighter. He came in, his legs wobbly. Stack drifted from the neutrol corner, almost graceful, very intent.

It was not orthodox, not even sensible. He chucked Potsy under the chin with a short pawing right. He drew back.

He sent an awkward, longshoreman's, ploughing left swing at Potsy's body, and Potsy doubled up like an old sack. He dropped the right once more to the base of the jaw.

Potsy hit and slid, as though for home plate. He skidded upon his face. The top of his skull made contact with the ring post. His kneecaps twitched once.

Joey Blow took Stack by the elbow. He said, "That was a good one, Stack. Better than the one did for Red."

Stack said, "Didja see my left? I hit him with a left, didn't I?"

"Well—you might say so," said Joey judiciously.

"You think I would have a chance with Louis, if he was around?" Stack asked. "Charlie would like that."

"No," said Joey. "He would kill you before you hit him with that right duke."

Charlie was pulling at Stack, his face bright, his eyes laughing, but going to where Muley Mantz glared murderously across at them. Well, the payoff would be later. Right now Charlie would laugh, while the Signal Corps cheered and the police got them to the dressing room and then out of the park.

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DOWN at the Curfew Club, Lucy had changed to a white gown cut very low, and after she sang her number she sat with them. Charlie said in her ear, "Look, I do not get your part in this. But here come Muley and his big, bad wolf. I have got the gaseous stuff right here. I poured it into the smelling salts before the fight and gave Stack a whiff of plain water. I will slip this under Potsy's nose and we will scram out of here."

Lucy said, "You poured it off. You—never mind, Charlie. Stick tight. It will be all right, Charlie."

"They carry guns and blackjacks," muttered Charlie.

Muley and his fighter sat down without ceremony. Potsy looked terrible, but very angry. Muley said, "Twenty grand. You wanna pay off, or shall we get tough?"

Stack was peering at the door, jumping about, as though he expected someone. He turned and said, "What is he talking about? It was a fair fight, wasn't it?"

"You think you can play with me?" growled Muley, his face evil with hatred. "I'll kill you and the twist."

Lucy said, "You crooks got bitten. You'd better forget it."

"I'll lay for you—" Muley stopped dead.

Captain Bowman was coming toward the table, and there were several young lieutenants with him. They made a cordon, and somehow Muley and Potsy found themselves being shoved to the side door.

Captain Bowman said, "Reed told us all about this. There are some enlisted men in the alley. Try your blackjacks on them. You will need them. And then think about what might happen if a detail looked you up every once in awhile from now on, you cheap crooks!"

Muley and Potsy disappeared. Tables were drawn up and the officers were very gay, toasting Stack. Charlie drew Lucy aside in the confusion and said, "This is all very bewildering. But it adds up that you didn't rat. I am glad of that, Lucy."

She whispered, "If I could have trusted you . . . I should have, Charlie, I guess, but I was scared—that other thing you were mixed up in. You see—I switched bottles that day on the beach."

Charlie said, "Oh! You made sure!"

"Yes," she said. "I knew there was a frame in the making. I knew it was coming and so I figured the only thing to do was to get in on it and doublecross those rats. But I didn't trust you."

He said, "Sure. I understand. That was smart, baby! Smart!"

"You're not angry, Charlie?"

"No. I'm glad." He held his head high. "I proved I wouldn't give it to him, didn't I? To myself I proved it. So—you're all right, and I'm all right. And—let's go back with Stack. I love the guy, too!"

They went back. Captain Bowman said, "So, if you come down tomorrow, Stack, I think we can call you inducted. Anyone who can take a radio apart and put it together again as quickly and expertly as you—we can use them. You'll get your chance for a commission, never you fear!"

Stack said, "Now wait! Wait a minute, Captain! You know who taught me all I know about radio?"

The officer said, "I could use him, too."

Stack said triumphantly, "Charlie Reed! Him!"

Charlie said, "Ahem! I mean—well—"

Stack said happily, "Aw, Captain Bowman useta be a cop! He knows all about that old rackets business. You were never really in the crooked stuff. You're good as in, Charlie! You and me, inna good old Signal Corps." He was like a little boy who has been given a shining present.

Charlie said, "Uh—well, all right. If I can pass. I mean—well, I'll be glad to. Just what I want to do!"

Lucy sat beside Stack, holding his hand. She was smart enough for them both, Charlie thought. She was beautiful, all in white, smiling at them.

Charlie stole a look at one of the leaner of the lieutenants. He wondered how he would look in khaki.

It would feel good, all right. He had won through, in these last weeks. He was everything a weak, clever boy wanted to be now.

A Robust Drama of American Pioneers **by Tom Roan in the July Argosy**

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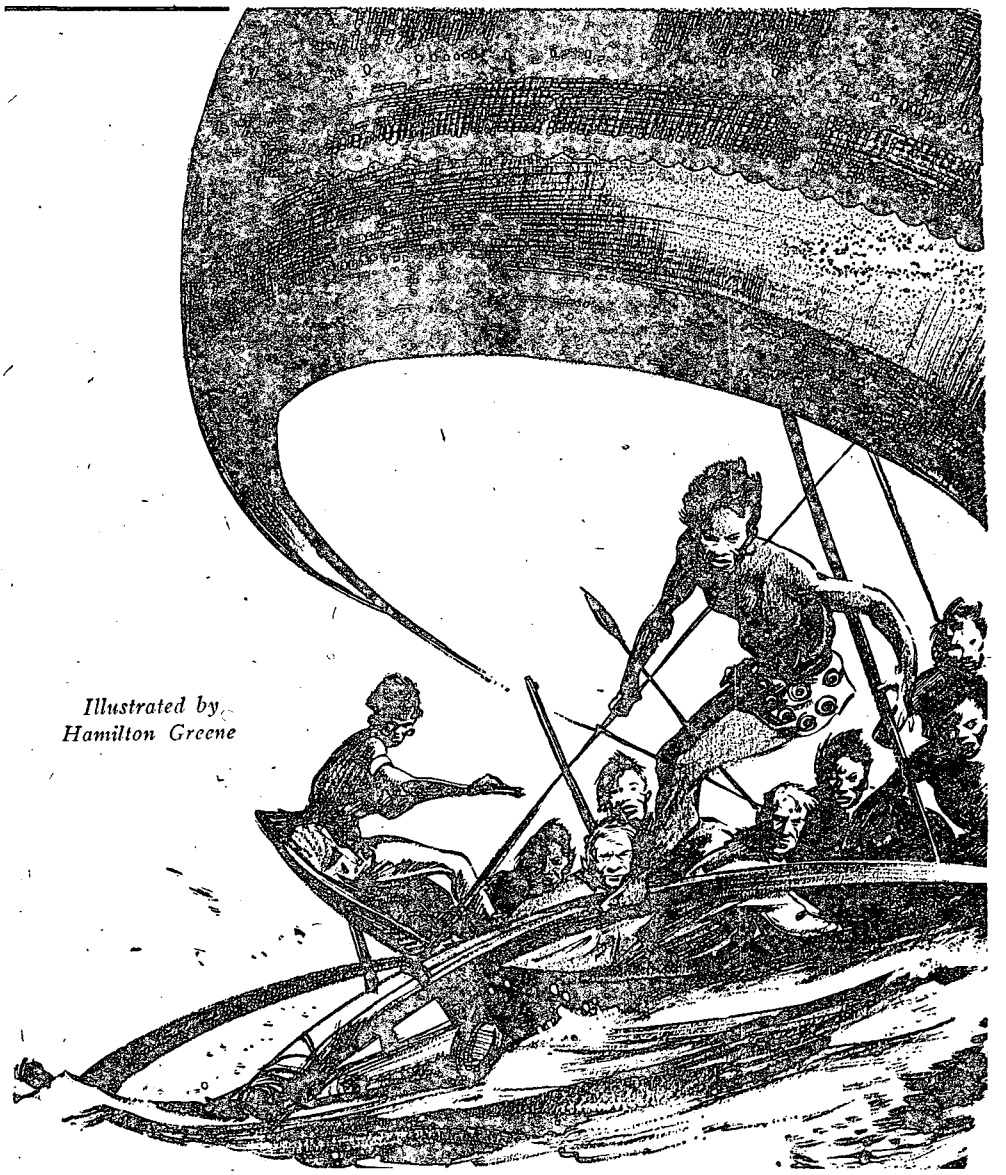
OPIUM



Illustrated by Hamilton Greene

MR. NOAH HAZARD, of Hazard & Hazard, turned the color of Zeng Tse Lin's oxblood vase and said to the interpreter, "Tell that pie-faced fool that I'm the new owner. That the *Egret* is not smuggling opium, and he can't blackmail me this way!"

Captain Amos Keane stroked his jaw with a square, tanned hand. "I wouldn't put it that way," the master of the *Egret* said, and shot a glance at the ship's carpenter, a monkey-faced Malay who spoke Chinese. "Soft-soap him. We can live that grudge down."

An American sea captain makes a fighting alliance with Malay

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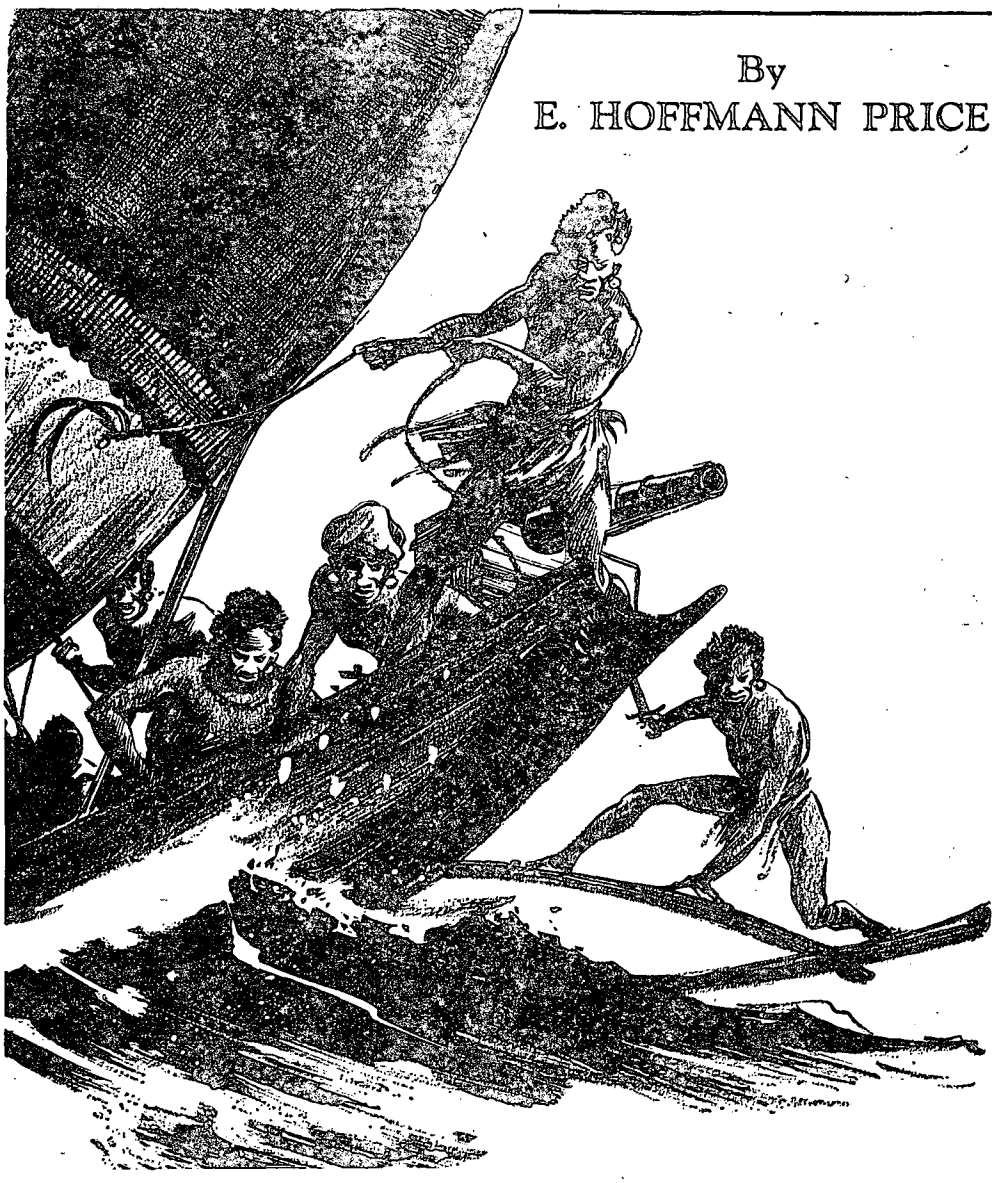
CLIPPER

A Novelette of the China Coast

By
E. HOFFMANN PRICE



Zeng Tse Lin, mandarin of the second grade, regarded his three visitors with impartial benevolence. He wore his official cap, with a button of coral and ruby; on the breast of his pale blue tunic a pheasant was embroidered in gold thread. His pale yellow face was bland, ageless, as he patiently waited for the consultation to end.

Noah Hazard caught the glance which his tanned skipper had flashed the interpreter, and said, "Ibrahim, say what I told you!"

The Malay's eyes widened in dismay. The blustering owner, of course, would

sea-hawks—to save his outlawed ship for the China Trade

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not know what his man actually said, but Ibrahim was honest. He protested, "Sir, that is not right way to talk to Chinese gentleman."

Keane flared up, "You're damned right it isn't! See here, Mr. Hazard, we're in an awkward position. He's got a grudge against the *Egret,* no matter what we say. His attitude is very much like our custom of clapping a libel on a ship."

"If you know so much about the Chinese," Hazard retorted, "why have you been returning with the hold half empty? If you knew your business, I'd not have had to come out to this God-forsaken hole!"

Keane answered, "I've tried to make it clear. It's the Chinese attitude. If a man steals, his relatives have to make good. If one commits a crime, and escapes, the judge sentences the first one of the family he can lay hold of. It's the same. It's the same *Egret.* She had a brush with the coast guard."

"I've heard that excuse for the past ninety-three days out of New York! That yellow scoundrel is fishing for a bribe, do you understand? A bribe to get him to permit the merchants to give us more cargo."

"Well, offer him a present."

"I won't be blackmailed! Since he's making such a point of smuggling, I'll show him the *Egret* can run more opium than she ever did before. I'm sick of this fanatic!" Mr. Hazard turned on the interpreter. "Ibrahim, ask him how much he wants?"

Keane cut in, "Don't be a damned fool, sir! He'd lose face unless he threw you out after a speech like that. The way to do it is to send him a present. That's a lot different from offering a bribe."

KEANE had been worried ever since the beginning of the interview. There was just one detail wrong: Zeng Tse Lin had not called for his own interpreter; he had addressed Ibrahim directly. That lapse from formality on the part of a mandarin of the second grade made Keane uneasier than he had been when Noah Hazard first proposed calling on the official who was zealously, even fanatically trying to stamp out the opium-smuggling traffic.

The *Egret,* if she continued having difficulties in getting silk and tea, would be frozen out of the China trade. Keane had his choice of half a dozen good commands; he would not stay long on the beach, but the *Egret* was his first clipper, and though he would not have admitted it even to himself, he loved her almost as much as he did that blond girl back in New York. If he could not redeem the *Egret,* she would go back into the smuggling trade, and finally she'd become a coolie ship, a filthy, floating hell.

The Chinese were peculiar, no doubt about that. If anyone had a just claim against a landlord and it was not settled, a notice would be posted, and the building would be boycotted; no matter how many times it changed hands, it would not stay rented. And now it seemed that the *Egret* was getting a taste of Chinese punishment.

Then Hazard exploded. He shook his fist under Zeng Tse Lin's nose and shouted, "I'll see you in hell first, Mr. Pigtail! I'll swamp this town with opium and make more money out of it than I ever did with your damned tea! Now call your interpreter and ask him to translate that for you!"

All this was poured out before Keane could grab the owner's arm. Zeng Tse Lin rose, and masked his hands in his flowing sleeves. After a bow, he said in halting but unmistakable English, "Not require interpreter, Mistar Hazard. Pleasant voyage. Sorry you are leave so hasty. Pleasant smuggling, Captain Keane."

They did not pause to drink their tea.

The missing interpreter appeared, and escorted them to the gate of the *yamen.* Once Hazard had wedged himself into his sedan chair, he choked, "You fool, why didn't you tell me he spoke English?"

"You idiot," Keane shouted, "do you think I'd have taken Ibrahim if I suspected Zeng Tse Lin spoke it? Just because he didn't have his own interpreter on hand, you had to run off at the mouth. You snapped at the bait and figured you could say anything you pleased, right in front of him."

"I'll—I'll—"

"Go ahead and fire me, any time you want!"

The narrow streets of Canton were jammed with beggars, with bare-legged coolies bent double by the weight of bales

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and chests they carried from the river front to nearby godowns, with peddlers and fishermen. Caravans came from the interior with tea and silk, with fragrant cassia bark and red cinnabar ore; and outbound traders were getting cotton goods and leather from the swift clipper ships from the other side of the world. The whole vast sprawling city was one whirlpool of commerce since the Foreign Devils had opened up treaty ports along the China coast; the river was lined with squatty junks, and further downstream the spars and rigging of schooner and barkentine and brig were dark against the sky; but topping them all were the masts and enormous yards of the fastest ships afloat, the clippers which flew the Stars and Stripes.

Waterfront stench billowed to meet the reek of alleys. In that blend of fish and offal and spicy sweetness, Keane caught whiffs of an ever-recurring odor: that of the peanut-oil lamps over which opium smokers cooked their deadly pills. Beggars squatted at the doors of dens where, in spite of Zeng Tse Lin, merchants and craftsmen, clerks and artisans blotted out their wits as they sucked at the long-stemmed pipes. The beggars, too poor to buy a dab of the costly stuff, waited for their chance at the residue.

Yin-shi and *yi-yin* still had power that a second smoking could coax out. Above the shouts of peddlers Keane called back to Hazard, "Look at them! Haven't eaten a square meal for days, and they're lining up to bum or buy pipe scrapings! Look at their faces!"

He did not hear Hazard's answer. Both sedan chairs were crowded to the wall to make way for the red and gilt palanquin of an official. His runners went ahead, cracking whips, slashing pedestrians to hasten their scramble. The rhinoceros embroidered on his green tunic indicated that he was a naval officer, a mandarin of the ninth grade; and judging from the smart livery of his coolies and runners, he was collecting rich bribes from smugglers the coast guard had failed to catch.

AT PAGODA ANCHORAGE, Keane and the owner boarded the *Egret*. The black of her spars and hull mirrored the ruddy light of late afternoon; not an hour of the six weeks she had lain at anchor had been wasted. Even though rolling lazily, sticks bare, she radiated aliveness.

A stretch of sand covered the deck. Two men were aloft, tarring the shrouds. Ibrahim, now that his duties as interpreter had ended for the day, headed for the carpenter's shop.

Keane went aft, to his teak-panelled cabin, and seated himself at the broad teak desk. He gestured to a chair, and said to Hazard, "Let's have this out, sir! If you've no confidence in me, put me on the beach, here or in New York."

"See here, Captain," the peppery little trader protested, "maybe I've been hasty. But here I am, with this useless hulk on my hands."

"This *what?*" Keane bounced to his feet; his big hands knotted into walnut-colored fists, and his long jaw jutted out. "Every time I think of the *Egret* being in your hands, I'm sorry for her!"

"Sit down! What I mean is, it's all very well for you to sail, so to speak, for the love of it. My position apparently isn't clear to you. I've got to collect freight. I can't have her coming home practically in ballast!"

"Ballast, my eye! In spite of everything, we've stowed six hundred tons of tea."

Hazard snorted. "Room for twelve hundred."

"I know, I know," Keane said wearily. "But you bought her dirt cheap. You can afford to be patient. Every so often, an honest mandarin, Zeng Tse Lin, for instance, does go on the warpath and tries to stamp out smuggling. He's just trying to make an example of the *Egret*, to discourage other skippers. He can't change China, though my hat is off to him for trying."

"It is, eh?"

"Certainly it is. Or didn't you see those stupid-faced, starved wrecks begging for pipe scrapings? Opium's killing China, making beggars of prosperous citizens."

"Nobody makes the fools smoke it!" Hazard snapped. "And Zeng Tse Lin's the idiot of the lot, persecuting us when the town stinks with opium! You'd better make sail, Captain, as soon as you can get port clearance on this paltry cargo."

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IN THE morning, the tide lifted the *Egret* over the bar, and she stood for the China Sea, splendid in her acres of canvas.

Now Hong Kong Island was astern, and the monsoon drove northeast across the China Sea. Twenty miles off shore, Man Shan Island was a bluish blot. Hazard pointed and asked, "Captain, isn't that where you said the opium runners dump their cargo?"

"That, or any one of a dozen other smaller islands."

A Chinese coast guard cutter, one of the several steam tugs which Zeng Tse Lin had armed to patrol the islands, wallowed in the choppy sea. Keane focused his glasses on the slovenly soldiers who lounged on deck. Then he saw the man who sat under an awning, fanning himself.

"Have a look." He handed Hazard the glasses. "Zeng Tse Lin is breaking a tradition. He's coming out personally to see that the coast guard patrol doesn't develop failing eyesight!"

Hazard muttered, "I'll be damned, it is him."

Far off the port bow, a Malay *prahu* skimmed over the waves, driven by an enormous three-cornered sail. The coast guard's cannon boomed, and clouds of blue smoke for an instant blotted out the target; then a column of water geysered up, several hundred yards short. The *prahu* did not heave-to. There was not a gunner in China who could hit such a swift target.

"Not much faster than the *Egret,*" Hazard went on. "Not very much. Captain, this ship has a bad name. But at the clip you drive her, I'm bound to get a good offer in New York, before there's too much noise about Zeng Tse Lin's fanaticism. There's more than the price of tea at stake this time."

Keane's face hardened. All his sailing skill was being used against the *Egret;* the better he handled her, the more certain she was to be sold into bad hands. Hazard accurately read what was behind the skipper's tight mouth and bitter eyes. He cocked his head, winked, nodded wisely. "Captain, you could buy the *Egret.*"

Keane turned two pockets inside out. "How?"

"By running some opium the next trip out. Your bonus, you know, would be quite high."

"You'd better go to your stateroom. Before I heave you overboard."

Hazard took the hint.

Thumbs hooked in his trouser tops, port and starboard, Keane stood there, scowling. Halfway down the passageway, Hazard turned back and croaked, "Suit yourself, then! If you don't someone else will, that's all she's good for."

CHAPTER TWO

Salvage Ahoy!

SOME days later there was a squall off the Macclesfield Banks. Wind screamed through the shrouds; rain pelted the men who went aloft to take in the skys'ls. A heavy sea pounded the *Egret,* submerged her deck; her lee rail was awash, and it seemed that her yardarms would touch the water. All hands turned out, fighting their way through the sea that swept over the bulwarks. Men were flung into the scuppers; and during the moments that followed, Keane wondered if the *Egret's* problems were not being solved for him.

In the midst of the fury, Hazard came up to the poop. He wore oilskins, but his bald head gleamed in the murky light, and he was grinning. "Brisk breeze, eh, Captain!"

"Go below, you fool!" Keane shouted at him.

Erickson, the mate, was shouting, gesturing. A man started aft, for the wheelhouse, but a wave smashed him against the bulwark. Keane bounded to the helm, and Hazard followed him. With three to grapple with the spokes, she responded; she stood offshore, and none the worse except for the main royal, whose tatters whipped in the wind.

Presently, the sun came out, and the treacherous South China Sea was all smiles again.

Hazard, drenched and grinning, came into Keane's cabin. A pool formed at his feet as he stood there, blinking and a little dizzy from the pounding. "Captain," he bawled, forgetting that he no longer had to outshout the squall, "that was magnificent seamanship."

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Keane smiled wryly. "Sometimes I've wanted to twist your neck, sir, but you have your nerve. Or it was sheer ignorance." He reached for a stone jug of Medford rum. "Splice the mainbrace?"

"Thank you, no. I never drink. Drink is . . . ah, the root of all evil."

He meant just that. He shook his head and made a clucking sound as Keane downed a hooker of rum. "What I meant to say, Captain, when I came on deck, was that you had picked a very poor time to run her aground. Of course, losing all hands would convince the underwriters."

Though Keane was pretty sure, he asked, "What are you getting at?"

"The China Sea is full of shoals and reefs, I've heard. Particularly around Banka or Billiton. We'd be picked up, being right on the clipper lanes."

"No! You're a businessman, so I won't try to explain why."

Hazard chuckled. "No harm asking. You're a fine seaman, but a fool from the ground up, Captain. Meanwhile, there is a lot of opium waiting at the mouth of the Hoogli River. Why not make for the Straits of Malacca? We've got the name, we might as well have the game."

"You've been studying geography, haven't you?"

Hazard rubbed his hands. "It's a wonder that that girl back home isn't jealous of the *Egret*."

"Well, she is."

Hazard lowered his voice to a confidential whisper: "Your bonus for running three hundred thousand pounds of opium will buy you this ship. All yours, captain."

Keane said nothing. Hazard went on, "The British are making quite an industry of it. If it hadn't been for that opium war a couple years ago, there wouldn't have been any treaty ports opened up. Maybe there is some small evil, but look at the great good."

THE owner's persuasion was making Keane waver. Somehow he had to save the ship.

Two days later, Keane was still wavering. He was about to go on watch when the mate came to his cabin and said, "Ship aground, sir, on the Pulau Hantu reef."

"I'll have a look, mister."

Erickson sent a man to heave the lead; the *Egret* put about, and stood inshore. Keane raised his glasses. Hazard came up from below. "What do you make of it, Captain?"

"*Gazelle*. Four-hundred-ton brig, I'd say. Bottom must be ripped out."

"By the deep, eleven!" the leadmen sang out.

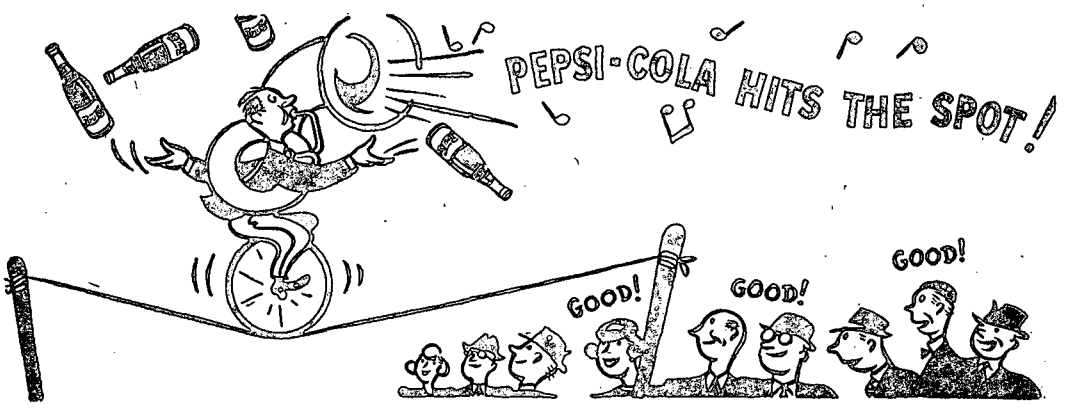
The rocks which had impaled the *Gazelle* barely reached out of the water. A quarter of a mile beyond was a low island, Pulau Hantu, perhaps a dozen miles long, and wooded.

"Any chance for salvage?"

Keane stroked his jaw. "It depends. Off-hand, I'm afraid not. Two masts went to pieces when she struck."

"Her cargo might be valuable, and we're half empty."

"Oh, hell! Can't you get that off your mind? With all the geography you've been reading, you might know this is pirate country. It's a wonder she's not stripped and her crew massacred."



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They were near enough now to hail the wreck. "*Gazelle,* out of Hartford, Captain Billings," was the answer.

"Tough," Keane muttered, as he eyed the sleek, low hull of the speedy brig. The rake of her remaining mast, the length of her yards, every line told him that this ship could show her stern to anything but a clipper; that she could give some clippers a run for their money, if Captain Billings was any kind of a seaman. And that he had run her aground proved nothing against him; the bottom, constantly rising and falling in these uncertain waters, presented their share of uncharted reefs.

"Quarter less six!" the leadsman sounded off.

As the *Egret* lost way, Billings called from the *Gazelle,* "Looks like you laded pretty light, Captain. How about salvaging our cargo?"

"If it isn't copra!"

Billings laughed. "You don't smell it, do you? Block tin, since you ask. Come aboard, sir, come aboard."

He was a big, hearty man with a big, onion-shaped nose; broad-chested, shaggy-haired, with powerful arms that reached almost to his knees. Most of the crew were white, though among those lined up at the rail were Lascars. Keane said to Hazard, "He might be heading for China with block tin, but it's a bit odd."

"Go over and look," Hazard urged. "I'll dicker with him."

So Keane and Hazard stepped into the dinghy. Ibrahim manned one of the sweeps; he had said to Keane, "*Tûan,* let me go and listen, I understand this Lascar talk."

BILLINGS met the *Egret's* skipper at the rail. "Well met, sir!" He waved a hairy hand toward the island. "Living on cocoanuts till the Malays settle us. Two of our boats swept away. Step into my cabin, Mr. Hazard. So you're the junior partner of Hazard & Hazard, eh?" He sighed gustily. "Then drive your bargain and get it over with!"

The owner of the *Egret* saw his chance, and decided then and there that legitimate salvage did not compensate for the heavy loss in value of the cargo of tea. The terms he named made Billings pound the table. "I won't stand for robbery like that."

Hazard shrugged. "You don't have to. After all, you can take passage with us and leave your cargo here until the Malays make arrangements."

"Not much choice between one kind of piracy and another!"

"Speaking of pirates," Keane cut in, "you'd better come aboard, and we'll stand out until daylight."

"Hell, Captain," Billings said, "they never attack at night."

Keane shook his head and turned to Hazard. "Picking up stranded seamen is one thing, and laying alongside to transship cargo is something else. It's often tough enough beating off a couple of *prahus* when you're under full sail."

Thumbs hooked in his galluses, feet cocked up on the table, Billings spoke up again. "Why do you suppose we've not already been *krissed* and looted?" He thumped his chair level. "I'll tell you why. I've got four brass cannon that blew the Malays out of the water. Yes, sir! A real surprise—blind gun ports, you know."

Hazard jumped up. "There you are, Captain Keane! Four guns to cover us while we transship."

Ibrahim bounded into the cabin, breathless and without ceremony.

"*Tûan,* the *muallim* is making signals," he gasped. "From our ship."

"Just a second, Captain," Keane said to Billings. Then, at the door: "I don't know why in damnation your watch didn't let me know."

He hustled down the passage, stretching his long legs to keep up with the trotting Malay. Before Ibrahim emerged from the after deckhouse, he halted and said, "*Tûan,* these be pirates! I have heard what I heard. Make sail, praise God!"

"You heard?" Keane's big hand closed on the wiry Malay's shoulder. "Lascar chatter?"

"By Allah! I know enough of their speech—"

Keane cursed between his teeth, then hesitated. He had to get that money-blinded Hazard aboard the *Egret* without arousing Billings' suspicions. Ibrahim yelled a warning, flung himself to the deck. Bare feet pattered; there was a wrathful shout as two Lascars and a Malay charged with knives.

Keane twisted, drew his Colt, but in the

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confusion, he could not fire without risk of drilling Ibrahim. He smashed down on a turbaned head. A blade darted down, another licked up from the tangle of brown bodies, and a man groaned. Then Billings shouted, "Easy, Captain! Drop that pistol before I pepper you!"

He held a double-barreled fowling piece at his hip. Two charges of shot would sweep the passage. Keane's weapon thumped to the deck. He knew from Billings' voice that this was no time to take chances.

"I begin to see why you're not afraid of pirates."

Billings no longer showed good humor in either eyes or mouth. "Move into that stateroom and be quiet. I need a ship, and I need one in a hurry."

Keane backed into the stateroom which the gun muzzle indicated. Two Lascars followed, boosting Hazard along. Once the captives were across the threshold, Billings said, "Your men haven't a chance, not with our guns laid to blow the bottom out of your ship. Might as well tell your mate not to be a fool."

"I'll tell him nothing! He knows a prisoner can't exercise command."

Keane turned his back. The door slammed, and a key twisted. Hazard said, "I'm still wondering why our throats weren't cut."

"Don't worry! There's plenty of time for that. Right now, we're a club over our crew. And about the best we can expect is to be marooned, and then massacred by Malays."

CHAPTER THREE

Rum for the Condemned

THE crew of the *Egret* surrendered; any other course would have been fool's valor. Before she could have weighed anchor, chain shot would have cut her standing rigging; and the odds in armament and numbers would have made a hand-to-hand encounter hopeless. Keane, looking through a porthole, said to his fellow captive, "I'm glad Erickson used his square head."

"What—what are they doing with them?"

"Putting 'em ashore. On the beach, with nothing but their clasp knives! Murder by proxy, that's what it is."

Keane was not exaggerating a great deal. And for the moment, he was as much concerned about Ibrahim as about the general prospect. The loyal Malay, rash instead of cunning, had gone down under a tangle of men who did their best to keep him from warning his captain. Whether Ibrahim was dead, or wounded, or whether he had managed to go over the side was a large question in Keane's mind.

Hazard grumbled, "That blasted interpreter of yours! If he'd used an ounce of judgment, we could have gotten away. It's no damned wonder they knew he'd overheard something."

"Ibrahim did his best. If you and I had used any judgment, we'd not been so ready to look for salvage in pirate waters! Now shut up before I forget you're a little man and kick you through the bulkhead!"

Hazard grinned. "You are the most evil-tempered person I've ever met. See here, this isn't so bad. It's a clear case of piracy. I'll recover on my insurance."

He sat down on a bunk, took out a pencil and paper; and began calculating. Keane's fists relaxed. He watched the little man's bald head bobbing in cadence with the pencil stabs. Kicking Hazard around would be quite pointless.

The crew of the *Egret* was now ashore. In the second boat that had put out, their captors had included sea biscuit and beef. Erickson, seeing Keane at the porthole, hailed the captive skipper.

"They're letting us have a few cutlasses," the mate said. "Little good that'll do us."

"Carry on, mister! You're in command. Don't waste any time on us."

That very night, Billings set to work transshipping his cargo. Rather than risk bringing the *Egret* dangerously close, he took hatch covers from the wreck, and these, with pieces of shattered spars, were shaped into rafts which plied back and forth; the capstans of the *Gazelle* and the *Egret* supplied the power.

By lantern light, Keane soon learned what he had suspected from the first moment of treachery and captivity. He caught Hazard's arm, yanked him from the edge of the bunk, and, by the nape of the neck, forced him to the porthole.

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"Look, and enjoy it! Those boxes are full of opium. Smell it? Opium for China. And how do you like the kind of lads who are in the business?"

Hazard twisted loose, glared at Keane, and retorted, "There are plenty of scoundrels in what you call legitimate trade! A man can deal in opium without being a cutthroat or—pirate!"

"Like hell he can. That stuff is too valuable to lose. Billings can't insure it, of course. He probably isn't a bad sort, or we'd all have been murdered, instead of being given that one slim chance on the beach."

KEANE stood at the port, listening to the clack of the winch, the thump of chests as they were dropped from the boom to the deck. He was watching the *Egret* go back into the opium traffic; she'd be armed again, she'd blow Zeng Tse Lin out of the water, and in the end she would be damned, an outlaw of the sea.

"If I could only get out of here! Set her afire, cut her cable, open her seacocks, finish her some way or other!"

Then his hands loosened from the port. Straining at it, tearing his palms and fingers, was childish. He sat down to think it out.

Attempting to bribe the Lascar who brought the coffee and lobscouse was wasted effort. "I would not live too long," he said, and his armed companion nodded agreement. "If you get loose, you do not live long either."

"Well, bring me a bottle of rum. Or brandy."

"Cannot do."

The door slammed, and once more it was locked. Keane shouted, "If you can't steal it, buy it."

There was no answer.

Later, Hazard said, "There is no sense in swilling liquor, Captain. I am sure it will not liberate you."

By dawn, much of the *Gazelle's* cargo had been transshiped; the *Egret* was lower in the water. Keane asked the Lascars who brought breakfast, "Where are my men? Still on the beach?"

"Not knowing."

"How much more *chandu* to load?"

"Not know. Maybeso can find brandy."

All the while, he had stood well to one side, so that his companion would keep a fowling piece trained on the captives.

"All right, bring it and I'll pay you."

"Pay now."

Keane grinned. "Pay him, Hazard. He doesn't think you look honest."

The owner protested, but Keane snapped, "Pay him, or I'll knock your head off. I want a drink."

So Hazard paid in advance.

Around noon, when heat rolled in waves across the dead stillness of the sea, there was a thump at the port. Keane looked up and saw a teak bucket. "New way of sending our rations," he said, but when he went to investigate, he found that the cargo was a stone jug.

He lifted it out, tugged the line, and watched the bucket rise from sight.

From the deck came the smell of curry; the Lascars were wolfing their rice. Perhaps some would find time to cook a pill of opium before resuming work for the afternoon. Keane whiffed the odor of spices, the tang of raw opium exhaled by leaking tins. Then he uncorked the jug and sniffed it.

"Rum." He tasted it. "Hasn't been cut. Now listen while I explain."

Hazard's eyes widened as Keane outlined his strategy.

THE sun was sinking when Hazard, listening at the door, gestured and said, "Here they come again."

Keane bounded to the bunk, and as the key turned, he gave a final pat to the dummy he had shaped of blankets. It was rum-soaked; the jug lay on deck beside it. He lunged for the jamb, just as the door opened and provided him with a screen.

The two Lascars, as he had expected, were bringing food. Hazard played his part, squatted on deck, mumbling as he supported his head with his hands. He looked up, stupidly, at the two who came in, and then clumsily hitched about as if to shake the figure sprawled on the bunk.

The Lascars thought that this was funny, particularly when Hazard tried to get up to take the pot of lobscouse, and found that he had rubber legs. With both men off guard, it was time for Keane's next move. He touched light to the rum spilled on the deck. Flame racked from behind the door; silent, eerie flame, which gave

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no warning. In an instant, it was at the heels of the barefooted Lascars.

Their retreat was cut off, and the circle of rippling blue was contracting. It took them a certain while to realize that a long stride, two bounds at the most, would carry them back to dry decking; and Hazard's yell of feigned terror was disconcerting.

Keane caught them flat-footed. He lunged from cover and ploughed through the widening band of ankle-high flame. Before either of the surprised men could act, he had cracked their heads together. "Grab that shotgun," he said to Hazard, and straight-armed the Lascars out of the circle of blue fire.

Neither could speak. Each had his brains thoroughly addled by that head-to-head smack.

Then Hazard fumbled the fowling piece. One barrel let go, throwing a handful of shot through the bulkhead. Smoke clogged the cabin. "Damn it, you would!" Keane groaned, and snatched the weapon. With his free hand, he caught Hazard's shoulder and boosted him into the passageway. "Aft! And up that companionway to the poop!"

The explosion brought Billings' crew from their meal. One of the officers bawled an order. The skipper, it seemed, was on the *Egret,* already having taken over his new command. Someone yelled, "Fire!" Then one of the Lascars in the prison cabin recovered sufficiently to correct that error. And as Keane raced across the poop, the crew was bounding up the ladders from the main deck.

"Don't dive there—the rocks!"

Hazard veered, and went over. He swam, but poorly, making little progress. Even in that brief treacherous dusk, he'd be picked off.

Keane whirled, holding the fowling piece at the hip. "Stand fast!" he shouted, before the first three men on the poop could close in. For good luck, he added a few words which someone had told him meant, in the Lascar dialect, "Sons of pigs!"

The mate came storming up, pistol drawn.

"You too, mister! Don't try it!"

Hazard sputtered and choked and splashed. If he kept that up, he'd get out of wind and probably drown within sight of the wreck. The mate said, "You've got no reason to run. We were going to turn you loose."

"But not alive. Not after this piracy."

"That's where you're wrong. Testify as much as you want, when you get home. All we need is one more shipment and we're through. Don't be a fool; you can't get your ship back again. Go below!"

"Go to hell, mister!"

"Don't be a fool."

The officer was good-humored, which surprised Keane, until a man spoke from the darkness of the companionway—a native, judging from his broken English. "Drop the gun, I have the pistol. Drop, quick!"

Keane started, made a shift. The man fired and then Keane cut loose. A howl came from the companionway. The man at the forward part of the poop closed in. They knew his weapon was empty.

Smoke and thickening gloom gave Keane his chance. He dropped the useless gun and went over the side. Pistol balls spattered the water, but he stayed under until, in that poor light, he had gained enough distance to risk the marksmanship.

He stretched out, quickly overhauling Hazard.

"I thought you could swim!"

The bald-headed merchant was choking and gasping too much to answer, so Keane gave him a hand; and soon he found that the currents were worse than he had expected.

Both men were exhausted when they stumbled across the beach. Hazard gasped, "Why'n't—they—put out—a boat?"

"Figured the sharks'd get us, I guess. Or the way the ship's wedged on the rocks, it'd take too long. Let's get going."

"Sharks! My God, you mean—"

"Water's full of them; the shooting kept them away," Keane said, and boosted Hazard to his feet. "If we can find the crew, there's still a chance to recapture our ship."

CHAPTER FOUR

Malay Chief

THEY had gone hardly more than fifty yards when a familiar voice said, "*Tûan,* we were making ready to surprise

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those pirates and turn you loose, when we heard the shooting and the yelling."

"Ibrahim, what happened to you?"

"Back there on the ship? Someone hit me while I was playing with those sons of lewd mothers, just enough to make me too dizzy to fight. By Allah, I could not help you. And when I could move, it was too late, and so I went over the side before they found out I was not dead."

When Ibrahim reached the end of a trail which led into the jungle, Keane saw that his whole crew was intact. Erickson got up from beside the small fire over which a pannikin of salt horse was simmering. "We hadn't forgot you, sir," the big Swede said, "only it didn't look like we could swim out there and surprise 'em, and cutlasses didn't seem to fit in any too good."

"And they won't, mister. Not till we can get alongside her. What's that you got there—that canoe?"

"Chips," he pointed at Ibrahim, "said he could patch it up. Good enough for a surprise party. But it's been damned slow work."

Keane looked at the battered hulk which his crew had found on the beach. "Any natives, any villages on the island?"

Erickson nodded. "On the far side. But they don't want any of Captain Billings. They don't want any of us, and once they find out there's no more cannon guarding the *Gazelle,* they'll come back to strip her and finish us. You see, it was their *prahus* he shot the hell out of."

"We have nice neighbors all around." Keane chuckled, watched Hazard squirming and slapping himself. "Best mosquitoes in the Indies, eh, Mr. Hazard?"

The merchant glared. "Well, what are you going to do, Captain?"

Keane seated himself on a rock, and watched the heat of the fire draw steam from his saturated clothes. Finally he said to Ibrahim, "Can you talk to the villagers on the other side of the island?"

"Yes, *tûan.* All Malay language is much the same. I can talk some, maybe they understand some."

Erickson eyed him. "You'll get *krissed;* so'll we all. We can still finish fixing this canoe."

"Too small to take us away from here. Too small to use for recapturing a ship.

We've got to get a war *prahu,* then slip up on the *Egret* from the seaward side, well before sunrise. Do you understand?"

"You can't talk the Malays out of *krissing* you, much less giving you a *prahu.*"

Keane said, "I'm trying. Ibrahim, take me to that village. Right now."

Erickson rose, hefted his cutlass. Slowly, the weary and discouraged men got to their feet. Only four others were armed. Keane shook his head. "Sit down, men. If things go wrong, you can't help a bit. If I'm not back by sunrise, I probably won't be back at all. In which case, launch this cranky hulk—and good sailing!"

FOR a while, Ibrahim skirted the shore; then he picked up a game trail which twisted crazily over thickly wooded hills. Rank grass slashed Keane, and rattan creepers tore him. The air was thick with the musty odor of decaying vegetation; night birds whisked past, and overhead awakened apes chattered.

An hour passed, and a second: and now Keane's face and hands were swelling from mosquito bites and the sting of countless tiny gnats. At last Ibrahim halted, and waited for Keane to clamber out of the knee-deep mud of a swampy stretch.

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"If Allah is good, we will not be *krissed*."

"*Tûan*, look." And he pointed. The village is just ahead, and if Allah is good, we will not be *krissed*."

"Let's get it over with."

"No, *tûan*. Do you wait here. They will trust me further when I am alone."

Keane accompanied Ibrahim for the next few yards, and then sat down on a fallen tree trunk. Ahead, he could just see the dull glow of smudge fires which smouldered beneath the elevated floors of bamboo huts. Beyond the outer circle of dwellings which filled the center of the clearing was an enclosure of sharpened stakes. This was clear in the moonlight, and so was the sea, gleaming through a rift in the jungle. Against the bright sky were the masts of *prahus*.

The wind brought him the smell of decaying fish, of rubbish flung into the narrow alleys of the settlement. Somewhere a dog growled. The village was asleep, though only Ibrahim could guess where Malay swordsmen might be lurking on guard against prowlers.

Ibrahim hailed the settlement. Keane could just see him, standing in the clearing, one hand raised. A man answered; others began to stir, and dark shapes came down the bamboo ladders which led from the floor levels of houses perched on stilts. Blades gleamed in the shadows, and then in the moonlight. In a moment, the entire settlement was awake.

A dozen armed men surrounded Ibrahim. Tense, sweating, itching from mosquito bites, Keane squatted there, unable to judge how his envoy was faring. Inside the palisade, a fire flamed up.

Finally, Ibrahim emerged from the crowd, and called, "*Tûan*, they will listen. I have promised them vengeance, and a leader who knows the ways of the *orang-puteh* and their ships. Come out and give the chief a present."

"What's he want?"

A needless query; but the words rang out, betraying none of Keane's inner quaking. The waiting Malays stopped chattering. From outshouting the sea, he had

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a voice that men listened to. Ibrahim answered, "Give the chief your watch or jack-knife."

Keane straightened up, squared his shoulders, and hoped that his wretchedness would not be too apparent by moonlight. When perhaps half a dozen paces from the Malay who stood fast when the others fell back, Keane halted and raised one hand.

He said, *"Tabay, engku!"*

"Tabay," the chief answered. "Greeting."

He was a head shorter than Keane, well muscled and wiry. He wore a red silk jacket and green silk pants; in his sash was thrust a *barong* whose haft gleamed with silver. At one side of him, blinking and sleepy, stood a servant who carried a betel nut box of polished brass.

As the flames in the compound flared up again, Keane could distinguish the deep lines of that shrewd face; the broad nose, the gleaming little eyes. The man stood there, erect yet collected as a jungle cat waiting for the moment to pounce. Ibrahim said, "Remember how I showed you the way warriors shake hands. I have told Suleiman that you are a fighting man."

Suleiman eyed Keane from head to foot. He asked a question, and Ibrahim translated, "Where are your weapons?"

Keane said, "Tell him that unless he gives me arms, I'll go back and take the ship barehanded."

Suleiman smiled a little, for he understood very well that there are times when a man had to advance, turning his face rather than his back to certain failure. He took a step forward, extending his upraised hand. Keane came to meet him, and their hands clasped at head level; then a swing right, to shoulder height, and a swing left: the ceremonial grip.

"He invites you to his place," Ibrahim said.

THEY followed Suleiman into the compound, and up the bamboo stairs of a house whose walls were of woven rattan. Smoke billowed up from below. Torches flared, making the shadow of rafters dance against the thatch of the roof. Suleiman seated himself on a bench which was carpeted with a Mosul rug, and invited Keane to join him. His servant prepared chews of betel nut and lime wrapped up in tobacco leaves.

Finally the parley began, with Ibrahim translating.

"The cannon sank most of our *prahus*. How can we face big guns?"

Keane answered, "They are unloading opium. They are divided. You tried to raid them by day, which is bad. Slip up by night."

The elders, squatting on the floor, ceased spitting betel juice and began protesting. Malays, whether pagan or Moslem, fear the night and the evils that haunt it. Desperation at times drives them to attack by dark, but these men were neither cornered nor facing sure and fatal peril. Keane, remembering Ibrahim's qualms, which persisted in spite of his association with white men, knew at once what caused the outburst.

"Tell them it's night or nothing! That we know both ships, that we can lead the surprise party. That the pirates are divided and off guard."

Ibrahim again outlined the plan, and decorated it with loot; there were many cases of opium to seize and sell; muskets and cutlasses and cannon. Some, it is true, were willing to face the risk, but most had been scared by chainshot that tore down masts and yards. Suleiman was non-committal. His decision would go with the majority, for he was too wise to issue a command that would be half-heartedly obeyed; he would not go against the wisdom of all his elders, and of most of his fighting men. Though he held the power of life and death over those fierce brown men, one rash move against custom, if it failed, would finish him. So he sat there, his face revealing nothing.

Ibraham translated, "They will attack by day. They will send out fireboats, and sail behind the smoke cloud."

Daring, but foolish; and if a few rounds of chain shot broke up the attack, the disgruntled Malays would exact vengeance from Keane's crew. Keane rose and said, "Then give us food and water and some *krisses*, and a canoe. We will attack them ourselves, and if we do not win, some of us will have a way of leaving the island."

The watch and the knife made Suleiman outdo himself. He loaded an outrigger canoe with provisions. And presently,

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Keane and his carpenter were paddling out to sea.

Later, as they skirted the island, Ibraham asked, *"Tûan,* are we going to try it?"

Keane shouted above the rumble of the surf, "It'd be crazy. With a couple of war *prahus* to hold Billings' attention, while we slipped up and boarded her, there'd be a chance. The only thing to do is to swim out and set the *Egret* on fire."

Better destroy her, if need be, than let her stay in the hands of opium smugglers. What Hazard did not know could not hurt him.

IT WAS an hour before dawn when Keane and Ibrahim beached the canoe, and set out on foot to rejoin the stranded crew. He found Erickson awake, and sitting beside a smudge fire. Hazard and the others were asleep. The mate pointed. "They made sail about midnight."

Though Keane had missed the lights of the *Egret,* as he rounded the headland, he had concluded that all hands had gone below for much-needed rest, except for a watch on deck; his one chance to use surprise against superior forces. "Damn it," he growled, flexing his aching arms, "they can't have transferred all that cargo!" He sniffed the air. "Maybe there's a squall on the way, and they'll stand in when it's over."

At sunrise, he saw that the wreck of the *Gazelle* was abandoned. After discounting the remote chance of a trap, he and Ibrahim put out to the reef, and boarded her. She was low in the water; already, she was breaking up. Much of the cargo must have been lost through her torn planks.

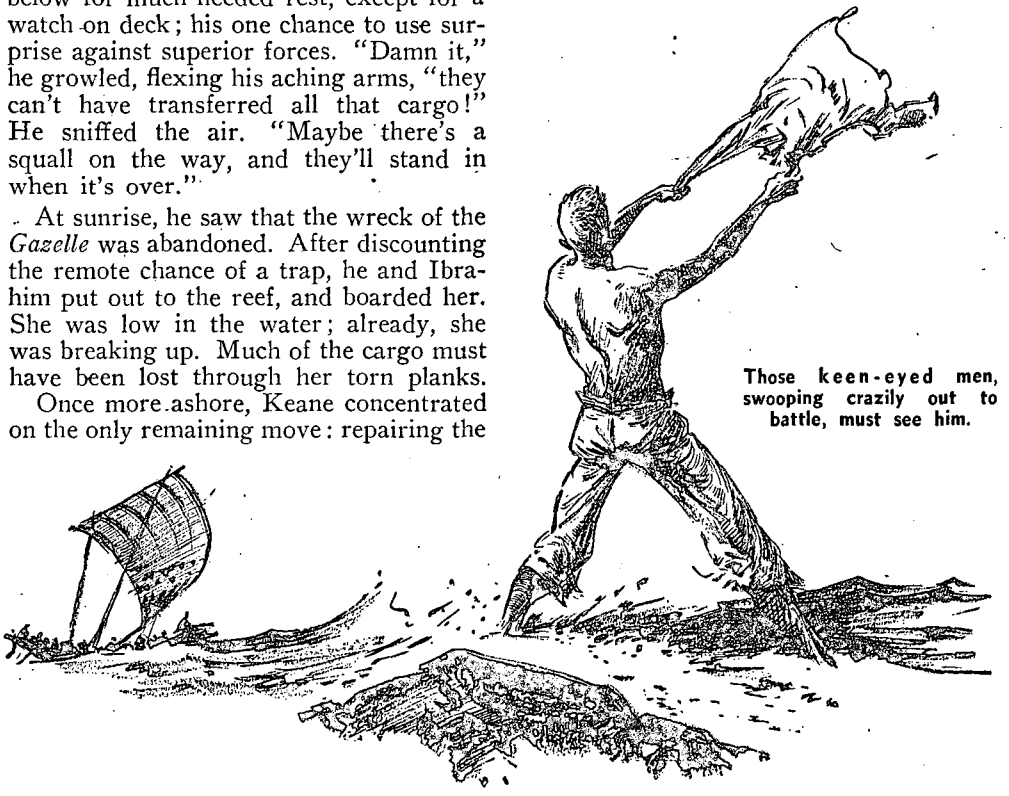
Once more ashore, Keane concentrated on the only remaining move: repairing the canoe on which Ibrahim had been working. That and the one bought from Suleiman would give the crew a chance to head for Kuching, on the Sarawak Coast.

"Why not go back to the village and get another good one?" Erickson asked.

Keane shook his head. "Mister, I told them that since they weren't game, we were going to sneak up and fight it out. Once Suleiman's Malays find out that we didn't, they'll think we were afraid. And friendship won't last long."

"That is right, *tûan,*" Ibrahim said. "Once we lose face, it will not be well with us."

He resumed work with a cutlass, shaping patches of jungle wood, and wedging them into place with pegs and with strands of wiry rattan. The crew cut bamboo for masts and yards, and started weaving sails of rattan. But they had scarcely made any progress when the freshening wind became a gale; the rising sun was darkened, and rain whipped the breakers and pelted the jungle.



Those keen-eyed men, swooping crazily out to battle, must see him.

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Finally the screaming fury made work impossible. The sea, driven inland by the blast, forced the fugitives back with their canoe and with the hull they hoped to salvage.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hawk of the Sea

THE storm had scarcely passed its height when a war *prahu* cleared the headland. It was still dark; black clouds muffled the sun, and the boiling sea was murky gray. She knifed the waves, and Keane stood there, wondering why the gale did not slash her sail to tatters, or snap her mast. And she was packed with armed men.

Like Keane, the crew of the *Egret* was too fascinated to be aware of peril. Ibrahim muttered, "By Allah, that is the grandmother of all *prahus!*"

Then Keane shouted, "It's Suleiman, coming out to finish Billings! Finish him in a storm when he won't be looking for trouble, when he can't point his guns."

She raced along, a black-hulled phantom with a black-striped sail; a thing of evil grace, as uncanny as the wiry brown men who ventured along that deadly coast. Erickson stuttered, "It's dark, only it ain't night, so they're not scared."

Keane flung himself into the wind, splashed through rain pools and through salt. He shouted, though he knew that a twelve-pounder's boom could not be heard above the wind. He waved his arms, and plunged for the rocks which still rose above the high sea. He tore off his tattered shirt and wigwagged it. The wind knocked him from his perch, but he came up, battered and choking, to try again.

Those keen-eyed men, swooping crazily out to battle, must see him. They would surely not have put out to massacre a handful of stranded sailors; they must be out for bigger game. And now Ibrahim, cutlass in hand, was clambering to a nearby rock, waving the blade.

The *prahu's* sail came down. Paddles were unshipped. She put about, plunging into the waves that charged across the beach. Just why she was not swamped, Keane did not know; but they beached her, and forty dripping Malays came ashore, Suleiman himself leading them.

Keane, half drowned, went to meet the chief. Before Ibrahim had interpreted half a dozen words, he knew that his guess had been right.

"We had darkness-by-day, which is different from the evils of the night," the hard-faced leader said, with an airy gesture toward the sea. "But Allah was pleased to take victory from us. When did they leave?"

"Hours ago, *engku.*"

The proud Malay did not object to being called "prince." Quite aside from that, Keane was sure that anyone who would risk putting out and skirting that deadly coast in such a gale deserved a fancier title. "Tell him that we know where the man is going! We'll show him, we'll help him get his men. We'll give him salvage."

Suleiman considered that, and sat down under a tree to chew betel and spit for a while. Keane knew better than to be impatient. He listened to Ibrahim, who did not translate until a meaty point had been made; he turned to Erickson and muttered in the Swede's ear, "Mister, that *prahu* could sail circles around the fastest clipper afloat. She can sure as hell overhaul the *Egret.*"

The Swede was too good a seaman to say that his captain was crazy, but he shook his head and rubbed his big nose. "Maybe so, sir."

Ibrahim finally turned to Keane. "*Tûan,* the prince says that he thinks you are lucky. If you had not been, the pirates would have killed us all. Or you would not have escaped."

"He thinks we're lucky!" Keane sat up straight. "Say—I never thought of that. Hazard, did you hear? We're lucky."

The owner groaned. "Well, they've not cut our throats yet."

Ibrahim went on, "The prince is not sure that one *prahu* can take a clipper in the open sea. Not one with cannon. The way to take a clipper is either with many *prahus,* or to wait until her sails are emptied by a headland, in a narrow strait. Or when the wind fails."

Keane spat a red jet of betel juice. "Tell him I know a way. If he overhauls her, we'll do the rest."

Another exchange, and then: "The

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prince says he will go a long way from home with a lucky man."

"Tell him I'll go even further, with a seaman like him."

Suleiman's wrinkles twisted and his smile showed all his blackened teeth.

AROUND midafternoon, the *prahu* made sail, and hauled close to the wind. Wiry Malays crawled out on the struts which supported the outriggers; spray-drenched, laughing, chattering, they scrambled back and forth, shifting their weight to keep the outriggers steady.

Keane could only guess what the *prahu* might log; he could hardly more than speculate on her leeway; but he began to understand why Malay skippers could skirt dangerous coasts, could swoop and skim like sea hawks. But Erickson still shook his square head, and jerked a stubby thumb at the bronze *lantakas,* swivel-mounted in supports shaped like oversized oarlocks.

"Pea shooters," he grumbled. "Put enough powder in 'em to make that scrap iron and stone ball scratch the sides of a ship, and they'd kick themselves loose from the bulwarks. Damn it, sir, Billings has twelve-pounders, long toms, and pistols for every man."

"There's one chance, and we're taking that!"

No one complained about the *prahu's* speed; it was incredible to every white man aboard. In spite of the *Egret's* head start, *Keane's* men were craning their necks, expecting every moment to overhaul the pirates. It was not until nightfall that they got their first realization of the hardships of Malay seafaring.

Jammed into a narrow hull, they crouched in spray-drenched groups. They had to sleep sitting up, for there was no room to stretch out; and since the sea was too heavy for a fire, they ate dried fish and rice which had been cooked ashore.

Dawn was bright and blazing. The sun beat down into the open hull, and there was no escape from it. Then came a calm, with hardly enough air to move the lean *prahu.* Paddles were unshipped. One of Suleiman's men began beating a brazen drum that was shaped like a pot. And all hands chanted as they drove at racing clip across the glass-calm China Sea.

Hunting the *Egret* in that broad expanse of water was not Keane's intent; he had to get to the islands off the China coast ahead of her. Then, with the field narrowed, he would have a chance.

One day, under full sail again, they slowly overhauled a clipper: the *Medusa,* out of New York.

"They're breaking out muskets," Keane said. "And cutlasses."

All hands were on deck. Men came out with steaming copper kettles: boiling water to discourage boarders. She crowded on stuns'ls and save-alls, and still she could not pull away. Keane hailed her. A six-pounder boomed, and a ball splashed in front of the *prahu's* bow.

Ibrahim said, "You want news? See if that ship has seen the *Egret?"*

"That's what I wanted," Keane answered. Then, to Erickson, "What'd I tell you, mister? This is a war *prahu* that puts the fear into 'em!"

"If we had to board her, it wouldn't be fun."

Ibrahim went on; "If we get ahead, I swim back, ask him."

"That's crazy! Wait—"

But the Malay ignored him, and went to speak to Suleiman, who squatted in the shadows of the sail and chewed *betel.* Whatever he said must have been to the point, for in a moment, there was a shouted order; the drummer began to sound off, and the Malays manned the paddles. With sweeps and sail, the *prahu* left the *Medusa* astern in a few minutes. And then Ibrahim went over the side, while the *prahu* hove to.

This must have puzzled the *Medusa.* There was no further gunfire. Straining his eyes, Keane watched Ibrahim bobbing in the water. The *Medusa* swooped toward him. Men leaned over the rail.

Someone heaved a buoy; and then a line. The distance was too great for the unaided eye. Keane judged only from the gestures, from the postures of men momentarily outlined against the sky. Hazard groaned, "You could have signaled and told them who we are. They've had picked us up."

"We don't want to be picked up."

"I do."

"You're going along to see more of the opium business," Keane told him.

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Then the *prahu* swung astern of the speeding clipper, and soon Ibrahim was visible, swimming easily. If he had exerted himself a great deal, he did not show it. As Keane gave him a hand, he asked, "What'd they say?"

"They say we are plenty damn fool, tackle the *Egret,* got plenty guns."

Keane said, "We're ahead of them! The man really must have seen the *Egret.* She has guns now."

"Can't be far astern of us," Erickson said.

So they sailed on, hauling for Man Shan and the other islands off the China Coast.

CHAPTER SIX

Prahu Battle

TWO days later, the *prahu* sighted the *Egret;* she was making for the barren islands whose passages Keane had been patrolling, and judging from her rigging, she had taken a severe pounding.

"Cargo shifted," Keane said. "Hasn't got her trimmed right. No wonder we gained so much."

Now that he had outraced his pet, he could not give the Malay boat too much credit. She veered, making for the clipper's starboard quarter, for with the *Egret's* listing, the guns on that side would be handicapped at close range.

The Malays fanned the fire, and lit matches for the gunners. Others rammed powder, stone balls, sharp flints and scrap iron into the *lantakas.* Grappling hooks and lines of *coir* were broken out, while Erickson served cutlasses and borrowed *kampilans* to his crew.

As the *prahu* closed in, Keane saw that Billings was taking nothing for granted. In these lawless islands off the coast, every smuggler was the enemy of every other, with the corrupt and sluggish Chinese coast guards a minor peril. While *prahus* often were used to pick up the opium left on these barren shores, their crews were not especially particular in getting the right lot: and this racing hull had too many men to leave room for cargo. Billings was getting all hands on deck and issuing arms. And guns reached from the *Egret's* ports.

Keane would have urged strategy, rather than Malay recklessness, but that, he knew, would make his allies feel that he lacked confidence in his luck: so he silenced Erickson's protest, and decided to make the most of hotheadedness.

Billings had to open fire at long range. At the first puff of smoke from the twelve pounders, the *prahu's* steersman bore down on his sweep; the outrigger thrust far into the water, and for a moment, she lay on her beam end, swerving wide. Chain shot howled and whistled, missing by many yards, and then the agile *prahu* swooped in, now hard-driven by paddle and sail.

Before the gunners could swab and ram and lay again, the Malays were approaching her blind spot, but meanwhile, Billings was spreading nets to hamper the boarders. Pots of hot water were brought to the poop, and men with muskets opened fire. Slugs spattered the rattan sail, and thudded into the hull; Malays howled from pain and fury, but plied their sweeps. Then both *lantakas* coughed fire and smoke. The recoil made the *prahu* halt, shuddering for a moment, and a hail of scrap iron swept the *Egret's* bulwark. But as Keane expected, the angle of fire kept the volley from doing any damage; the main value was the concealing cloud of smoke, and the scramble of the defenders to duck for cover.

With matchlock and flintlock, the Malays peppered the men at the bulwark. Then came an interval of silence. Both sides were reloading musket and pistol, preparing for the impending clash on deck. Battle-crazed brown men whirled grappling hooks, ready to cast. Keane crowded forward, cutlass in hand. He was near enough now to see Billings, and he turned around to shout, "That's the man to nail!"

Pistols and muskets began to pop again. Billings bawled to his men, "Hold your fire!"

Then Keane saw the Long Tom come into line: an overgrown weapon with thrice the bore and twice the barrel length of a normal musket. Half a dozen Malays cut loose at the gunner, but he stood to his station; then a blast, and the *prahu* was out of the running.

It happened an instant after Keane understood the screech and whistle and

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the black length that snaked crazily out of the smoke, and through the air. Instead of loading with ball, the gunner had rammed home a length of light chain. It cut the parral-rope; yard and sail and rigging crashed, entangling the men at the paddles, knocking some into the water.

Suleiman, cursing and raging, came up with his leaf-shaped *barong* and set to work cutting away the tangle.

The *prahu* lost way, and the *Egret* swooped on.

IBRAHIM muttered, "*Tûan,* this is bad. It was only luck, very bad luck, which made the infidel do with a musket what he failed to do with a cannon."

"Luck, hell! We haven't started to fight yet," Keane retorted, but the weight of Malay opinion would be hard to overcome.

In hand-to-hand battle, the little brown men were utterly fearless, but they would not persist in the face of bad luck. "Ask Suleiman," Keane went on, "to clean up this mess, and we'll paddle after her. When she anchors, I'll board her with my crew, and if we show him we're lucky, he can use his own judgment. Just keep her in sight."

Suleiman considered this, and admitted, "By Allah, it is true that we can see a clipper further than a clipper can see us. And that father of pigs does not yet know that he deals with a man seeking vengeance. Perhaps this thing can be done."

So, as the *Egret* became smaller in the distance, the tangle of rigging was cleared. While the sail could be raised again, and the yard spliced, too much time would be lost. Now that Billings had been sighted, he had to be kept in sight, for he must be very close to the cove where he would meet runners to receive his cargo.

"The *Medusa* sighted her," Keane said, "and gave word of her in Hong Kong. So the runners would know, and be ready."

Suleiman nodded. "That is wisdom. Maybe we can yet surprise them, while they unload cargo." His somber face brightened. "Slip up on them by land and *kris* them to the last man."

Keane said to Erickson, "Cheer up, mister! I think he's believing in our luck again."

The Swede said glumly, "I won't believe there is such a thing until I bend a cutlass over Billings' head!"

"Don't do that," Hazard croaked. "I want to see him dancing at the yardarm!" Having small hands, he was able to grasp a Malay *kris,* and he waved that snaky weapon for emphasis. For the moment, he was not preoccupied with worrying about how much salvage Suleiman would exact.

Driven only by paddles, the *prahu* was low and inconspicuous on the water. The sun was low, and the men bent to their task, closing the gap as much as they dared. This time, from necessity, they would perhaps risk a night attack; or so Keane hoped, after listening to Ibrahim's opinions. Unhappily, the loyal Malay concluded, "But that is all as Allah wills."

Then, from far ahead, Keane heard the boom of a twelve pounder. Squinting across the water, he saw smoke: that of a gun, and that from the stack of a tug. A coast guard patrol was signaling the *Egret!*

Ibrahim shouted to Suleiman, "*Engku,* there is our luck! The Chinese guns—he will look forward, not back!"

"Get busy on the drums," Keane added.

But this was needless. The big brazen tubs were thump-thumping, fresh men relieved the weary ones; paddles flashed. Every scrap of rigging was thrown over the side. Lightened, the *prahu* darted through the water, and Keane seized a paddle.

A bluish cloud poured from the *Egret.* She was answering the Chinese coast guard, for she did not have enough seaway to maneuver. Someone had made good use of his knowledge of the smugglers' islands. And that, Keane told himself, must be Zeng Tse Lin, the one mandarin who did not accept bribes; he was sure of this when the little steamer answered with another gun.

AS THE *prahu* came nearer, it became plain that the *Egret* had met only a temporary obstacle. Chinese muskets were popping like firecrackers; the stumpy tub, slow and wallowing, manned by clumsy gunners, was closing in, with a single twelve pounder. Billings gave her another broadside. She rocked in the water, but carried on, trying to get near for her

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soldiers to board the black-hulled smuggler.

The Chinese were shooting firecrackers now, as well as muskets. Keane, paddling until he tore the blisters from his palms, tried to picture Zeng Tse Lin, correct and calm and placid, flicking his fan; persisting because he had to maintain face.

The *prahu's* grappling irons caught the *Egret's* rail before her crew realized that an enemy had slipped up from astern. Keane scrambled up the side, hand over hand; his crew and Suleiman's swarmed after him as other lines were hooked fast.

Billings whirled, firing wildly with his pistol. Keane closed in, cutlass ready. Blades clashed; but the duel was broken up by the rush of Malays. Muskets flamed through sulphur smoke, and the pirates charged from the bulwarks. Keane and Billings, cramped by the press, were swept over the poop.

The twelve pounders were silent; Suleiman's men had *krissed* the gunners. When Keane regained his feet, he saw Noah Hazard flailing a *sundang* he had picked up somewhere in the confusion. Keane struck the blade from his hand, and tapped him over the head with the flat of his cutlass; that would save him for future reference.

The *Egret* was running wild; since the surprise, there had been no one at the helm. Keane blocked a cut that would have split Erickson's head, and made a *moulinet* which settled one of Billings' Lascars. Then he shouted, "Take the wheel, mister! Hold her hard a-port!"

And as she swung away from the rocks, the deck was fairly clear; the survivors of Billings' crew were going over the side, and making for shore. The Chinese coast guard was wallowing helplessly. Steam gushed from a hole amidships. And while the shouting Malays danced about the slippery deck, finishing whoever was too badly wounded to go over the side, Keane sent a man to the wheelhouse.

Hazard squirmed up from a tangle of Lascars who had been cut down over him. He rubbed his head, blinked, and demanded, "Captain, where's that Billings?"

"I'm looking for him now. I lost him in the fracas."

Then Ibrahim came trotting up. "Look, *tûan!*" He pointed to the pin rail. "There is his head. A gift for Zeng Tse Lin."

"Damn barbarian!" Hazard snapped. "I wanted him hanging from the yardarm."

The *Egret* was now alongside the Chinese boat. Keane lowered a ladder. For a moment, he doubted that Ibrahim had been right in speaking of Zeng Tse Lin; then he looked a second time at the bloody soot-streaked man whose cap and embroidered tunic had neither shape nor color, and recognized the mandarin.

There was a punctilious exchange of bows, the litany of compliments. Zeng Tse Lin flicked his soggy fan, and regarded Billings' head for a moment. "That face is familiar. I have long wanted to meet him. Thank you, Captain Keane."

Hazard picked his way toward the skipper and the mandarin. He clasped his two hands, and bowed. "I suppose you want to inspect the ship?"

Zeng Tse Lin smiled. "Not at all. The *Egret* left with proper clearance papers. She is bound for New York. The master of the *Medusa* told me of white and brown men racing in a *prahu,* and he mentioned that the *Egret* was already on her way back to China, so I was interested. But since Captain Keane set foot on her deck before I did, I am not at all interested in her cargo." He bowed. "Gentlemen, the next time you are in Hong Kong, I promise you all the tea and silk you require."

When the mandarin was back on his crippled patrol boat, Hazard asked, "Captain Keane, you might have offered him a tow to the coast."

"He'd have lost face. He'll manage, somehow. Now, this cargo of opium?"

"Oh, to hell with opium! With all the scoundrels and cutthroats in the business—throw it overboard! And give Suleiman this collection of cannon and powder. Ibrahim, find out what he wants, and tell him he can have it!"

A Dramatic Novelette of 14th Century Gibraltar by Edward A. Dieckmann In the June Argosy

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Army high jinx in the South Pacific

"Me win!" he said. "Plenty strong fella me. My word."

THE STRATEGY OF PRIVATE KEW

By WILLIAM CHAMBERLAIN

CORPORAL Luke Dorgan was sleeping peacefully in the back of a truck when the bugler thrust his head under the rear curtain. "Hey, Luke," the bugler said, "throttle down that tonsillitis aria that you been disturbin' the morning with, and roll out. The top kick wants to see you and Pinky right away."

Nothing but a deeper snore answered him, and he reached into the truck and yanked urgently at Luke's foot. The snoring stopped, and Luke sat up suddenly, his hair wild and his arms waving. One fist just missed the bugler's nose.

"I'll show you, yuh fat Yamamoto," Luke mumbled.

"Come out of your hop," the bugler said in an aggrieved voice. "An' just who are

Illustrated by Charles Dye

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you callin' a fat Yamamoto, anyway?"

Luke blinked the sleep from his eyes and reached for his gas mask and his iron hat. "Aw," he mumbled sourly, "I thought you were a Jap at first—you look ugly enough to be one. What's the big idea of wakin' me up? I was on duty all last night."

"First sergeant told me to have you an' Pinky report to him at the orderly tent," the bugler said in the tone of a man who disclaimed all responsibility. "That's all I know."

Luke looked morose as he slid out of the truck, shrugging his raincoat up around his ears. The morning was hot with the steamy stickiness of a Turkish bath and the rain fell in a steady drip. These were the usual weather conditions on Taibonga Island.

"Where's Pinky?"

"I seen him goin' off toward the native village maybe a half hour ago," the bugler said. "He an' that old cannibal that runs the place—the one they call Joe—have been thicker'n thieves lately."

Luke swore and started off through the trees. A Melanesian village sprawled haphazardly along the banks of the muddy creek a quarter of a mile down the ridge and presently he came in sight of it. A small crowd was gathered under an unwalled thatch at the edge of the stilted houses and Luke turned in that direction, guessing that he would find Pinky there. The crowd paid no attention as he came up and he paused for a moment to see what was going on.

Pinky Kew had spread his raincoat on the ground and he and a wizened native, wearing a crownless derby hat and little else, were hunkered down over it. A half dozen other natives and twice as many ebony-hued urchins stood at a respectful distance. As Luke watched, Pinky's companion dipped into a greasy pouch which hung at his waist—Pinky prompting him as he did so. There was a benign expression on Pinky's moon-shaped face.

"Okay, me shoot'um five fella dolla," Pinky said in his best *beche-de-mer*. "You put 'um down five fella dolla, Joe. My word!"

Joe pulled a handful of Mex dollars out of the pouch, squinted mournfully at them and then dropped them on the raincoat. Pinky nodded and beamed his approval.

"Okay. Now you watch'um strong fella you. Me mak'um talk along that fella dice. You savvy strong fella?"

"Me savvy," Joe said. "My word."

PINKY rattled the dice beside his ear, spoke to them in a caressing voice and then tossed them out onto the raincoat. They came to rest with a pair of fours showing and Pinky reached for the money.

"Me win," he said, looking at Joe out of the corners of his eyes. "You savvy? Plenty strong fella me."

"Plenty strong fella you," Joe agreed sadly, dipping into his pouch again. "You strong fella too much. My word."

Luke choked and stepped forward. "Give it back to him, you crook!" he snarled, swinging his foot. Pinky looked back over his shoulder with a startled expression and then dived across the raincoat. Luke glared at him. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, you fat Dillinger! How much have you took away from him?"

"Aw, only a couple of dollars," Pinky mumbled.

"Come on—come on! How much?"

"Maybe it was a little more—you know I ain't good at figures, Luke. Anyway, I was just teachin' him." Pinky's face took on a virtuous look. "I was goin' to give it back to him tomorrow."

"Swell," Luke said. "You can start givin' it back to him right now. Shower it down on that raincoat."

"Aw . . ." Pinky began. Luke picked up a stout club and Pinky sighed and dug a hand into the pocket of his khaki trousers. Sadly he made a little pile of Mex dollars and even more sadly Joe reached again for the pouch at his waist. Luke stopped him.

"Forget it, Chief," he said grimly. "This is on Private Kew. All right, Monte Carlo, that's the chief's bet you put out there so far. Now get busy an' fade it—an' with your own money, too. Maybe this'll cure you of your cute little tricks."

Pinky sighed again and then dug into his pockets and added a little heap of green G.I. bills to the stack in the center. Joe's beady eyes gleamed. Finally Luke was satisfied and pushed the dice across the raincoat with the toe of his boot.

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"Okay, Chief. Roll 'em out."

Joe grinned toothily and spat a stream of scarlet betel juice at a tree as he reached for the dice. He rattled them beside his ear, jabbering unintelligible syllables, and then tossed them down. They came to rest with a pair of fours showing and for a moment Joe sat there blinking at them. Then a pleased grin spread over his face and he reached a hand for the money.

"Me win!" he said. "Plenty strong fella me. My word."

"Hey!" Pinky began in a shocked voice. "You robber! You can't get away with a trick like—" Then he caught the look in Luke's eye and his voice trailed off disconsolately.

"Beginner's luck," Luke said sarcastically. "An' to think that you were the one that taught the chief how to shoot craps, too. Come on."

THE first sergeant looked up without enthusiasm as Luke and Pinky ducked through the flap of the tent which served as an orderly room. He finished drawing a heavy black line on the piece of paper in front of him and then put the pencil down.

"For the last two years," he said, "I have been looking for a job that you two birds could do an' now I have found it. You can't imagine how good it makes me feel."

"What's the job?" Luke asked sourly.

"Sub decoys," the first sergeant said with relish. "They're fixin' up a booby trap for a sub down at Tari-tari Bay out of what is left of Number Three light, an' you guys are going' to run it."

Luke and Pinky knew what had happened to Number Three Light. A Jap sub had showed up a few nights before and shelled the searchlight with such efficiency that it wasn't much more than scrap metal now. Old Lucillius Dulligan, commanding officer of the anti-aircraft regiment, was extremely angry about the whole business. When the Old Man got sore, things happened. But this booby-trap gag . . .

"What do you mean—booby trap?" Luke asked suspiciously.

"It's this way, sweetheart," the first sergeant said in a sugary voice. "They're goin' to set up the decoy light at the head of the bay. You'll turn on this light so that the Jap sub will come in an' start taking pot-shots at it. There'll be a gun battery located handy and they'll sink the sub. There's nothin' to it."

"Hey!" Luke said angrily. "Where do you get that stuff?"

"Now, now," the first sergeant told him. "You volunteered for it, didn't you? An' think how proud your folks will be back home."

"What do you mean—we volunteered?"

"You volunteered when you run your truck off the bridge night before last," the first sergeant said grimly. Then he added in a more cheerful voice, "Probably nothin' will happen to yuh, anyway. Besides, Captain ap Kern is goin' to be there."

The information didn't cheer Luke; he had been out with Captain ap Kern before. The first sergeant pushed across the sheet of paper which he had been working on. It was an aerial mosaic and he traced the heavy pencil line with his finger.

"This here is the old sandalwood road," he said. "Follow it down to where I have marked this X. The captain will meet you there. He wants you to bring him two extra controller cables, a hundred feet of rope an' two ten gallon cans of gasoline. Get it?"

"Yes, sir," Luke said.

The first sergeant leaned back and squinted reflectively at the tent flaps. "An' I wouldn't get lost gettin' there, if I was you," he added. "Captain ap Kern might not like it. There's liable to be trees down across the road, so take a couple of axes an' a cross-cut saw with you. You wouldn't want to get stuck so you couldn't do no decoyin'."

IT was raining as steadily as ever as Luke and Pinky went through the brush toward the truck park. Pinky plowed through the mud with his hands in his pockets and his round face solemn. He stopped beside the truck and turned around to Luke.

"Yuh know, Luke," he said, "I don't like it."

"Don't like what?"

"Them trees bein' down across the road. Choppin' 'em out looks like a lot of work to me. What we ought to have is some dynamite."

"Arrr!" Luke said. "Get the stuff the

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captain wants, you big rummy, an' get it loaded into the truck! An' don't leave out the axes, either. I'm goin' down to the kitchen to get some sandwiches to take along with us. You be ready to roll when I get back."

The cook on duty in the kitchen spooned the last of a can of peaches into his mouth and nodded as Luke ducked under the fly. "If it ain't Corporal Dorgan," he said, tossing the empty can into the sump hole. "Or should I say 'the late Corporal Dorgan'?"

"Never mind the clowning," Luke told him sourly. "Just dish me up a half a dozen sandwiches an' let it go at that."

"Okay, okay," the cook said, reaching for the bread knife. He chopped thick slices off a load and stacked them in a little pile. "What'll you have for your Last Supper, chum—cheese or bologna?"

"Listen," Luke told him, "one more of them cute little cracks an' I'll climb over that table an' cram a handful of teeth down your throat, you fat food-spoiler! Now get busy!"

"Aw, I was just kiddin'," the cook said in a deprecating voice. He passed the sandwiches over. "Probably everything is goin' to be all right. They tell me them Japs are lousy shots, anyway."

Luke's thoughts were gloomy as he left the kitchen and went back up the hill toward the truck park. Pinky had turned the truck around and fastened the back curtain so that the rain wouldn't get in. Luke wondered a little at that; usually Pinky left the back curtain to stream out behind, rain or no rain. Pinky thrust his head out of the cab as he started the engine.

"Hop in," he said, noting Luke's inspection of the back of the truck. "Yuh don't need tuh worry about nothing, Luke. The old bucket's all loaded up an' ready to roll."

"Sure you didn't forget anything? I better check. . ."

"Naw," Pinky said. "Come on in out of the rain."

They lurched off down the muddy hill with Pinky driving in his usual manner which skirted disaster by inches. At the foot of the slope they jounced across the log bridge which the Engineers had built and then turned into the soupy track which meandered off through the jungle. Pinky opened up the throttle and the truck rumbled and began to careen across the chuck holes like a ship in a heavy sea.

After a half hour they skimmed across the top of a flat ridge and began to zoom down into the valley where Battery C had its guns in position. The jungle thinned out here to scattered trees and Luke could see activity on either side of the road. Men splashed back and forth in the rain, getting two of the guns ready to move, and then a tractor lumbered out from behind a screen of brush and started to crawl across the road in front of Pinky's speeding truck.

PINKY said, "Oh-oh!" and stabbed at the brake with his foot. Mud erupted around them like a geyser as they skidded sideways and came to a stop a half dozen feet from the stalled tractor. Then a muddy figure climbed out of the ditch and stalked forward to put a foot on the running board on Pinky Kew's side.

"All right, Barney Oldfield," a voice said out of a gooey mask. "Where's the fire? I've got a good notion tuh pull you out of there an' slap you around a couple of *versts* of jungle."

"Aw, let him alone, McCarthy," Luke said. "It's your own fault—you ought to have had somebody out flaggin' down traffic. Besides, it wouldn't do no good to slap him around. He's punch drunk already."

Pinky leaned his elbows on the wheel. "Well, if it ain't Sergeant McCarthy," he said. "How are you, Sarge? I didn't recognize you in your make-up."

"Shut up," Luke told him and then turned his attention back to McCarthy. "What you guys doin'—moving?"

"Naw," Sergeant McCarthy said, wiping his sleeve across his face and staring unpleasantly at Pinky. He was a big man with a square jaw and hands that could circle a stovepipe. "We're just takin' a couple of guns down to Tari-tari Bay tonight where we are goin' to bag us a Jap submarine. The Old Man is payin' a hundred bucks to the outfit that gets this sub, an' me an' my gun crew figure that's us."

"A hundred bucks ain't hay," Pinky Kew observed.

"It is not," Sergeant McCarthy said.

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"Particularly when you add it to that little pool you promoted on which gun crew would be the first to get a Jap."

"Hey," Pinky said in an alarmed voice. "That pool was on who was goin' tuh get a Jap plane first. Subs don't count."

Sergeant McCarthy's gaze became more unfriendly. "That pool was on any kind of a Jap. Furthermore, I happen to know that there is sixty-three bucks in it after you have taken your ten percent cut. Sweetheart, you have that sixty-three bucks ready to hand over tomorrow morning because I'm comin' around to get it. Understand?"

The tractor had pulled clear of the road and Pinky slipped the clutch in again and straightened the truck out. He was morosely quiet as they angled off across the valley and began to climb the ridge on the far side. Luke got out the map which the first sergeant had given him and began to study it. It was a crazy-quilt pattern of shades and shadows which didn't mean much and presently he folded it up again and put it back in his pocket. The rain was slackening a little.

An hour passed and still Luke had seen no sign of the old sandalwood road which the first sergeant had said branched off to Tari-tari Bay. He began to worry a little.

"Yuh think we've passed it?" he asked Pinky.

The latter stared morosely ahead and didn't answer as they jounced through a mud hole which rattled the gear in the back of the truck. Luke jabbed an elbow into Pinky's ribs and repeated the question.

"Huh?" Pinky said. "Passed what?"

"The old sandalwood road."

"Aw, I wouldn't know nothin' about that," Pinky said in a worried voice. "I got my own troubles to think about an' I don't mind tellin' you, Luke, that I don't think you should have done it."

"Done what?" Luke demanded crossly.

"Made me lose that money. I sort of got an idea that Sergeant McCarthy ain't goin' to like it when I tell him that Joe won his sixty-three bucks in a crap game."

Luke straightened up with a jerk. "You mean that was the pool money that you shelled out back there in the village?"

Pinky nodded, twisting the wheel hard over to miss a stump. They skidded around it and bounced on down the slope as Luke sat back in his corner. A fine kettle of fish, he thought sourly. McCarthy would probably hold him to blame.

"Two million men in this army an' I have to draw *you* in the discard," he mumbled. "You ought to have had better sense than to gamble with that money."

"Well," Pinky said, "it wasn't exactly gambling. Not until you showed up, anyway."

IT was after one o'clock when Luke finally saw an opening in the jungle which branched off to the left. It didn't look much like a road, but wheel tracks were faintly discernible turning into it, and he yelled to Pinky to stop the truck as he pulled out the map again. For a moment he studied it with scowling concentration, then handed it over to Pinky.

"Can you read a map?"

"Sure. What you want to know?"

"Where we are, stupid."

Pinky had recovered some from his melancholy. He took the paper in his hands, turned it aimlessly while he squinted at it and then handed it back.

"That ain't no map," he said in a positive voice, "because it ain't got any Esso signs on it."

Luke swore and took it back. "Well, all we can do is take a chance that this is the sandalwood road. If it isn't, Captain ap Kern will have our hides hung up to dry tomorrow."

"Maybe we ought tuh ask Joe where we are," Pinky suggested.

"Oh, sure," Luke said sarcastically. "Or we might ask the first sergeant. Just stick your head out of the cab an' holler at him."

"Which one?"

"Take your pick," Luke told him sourly. "What do I care?"

Pinky thrust his head out of the cab window. "Hey, you fella, Joe. You savvy what name this fella place?"

Luke dug an elbow viciously into his ribs. "Very funny! I've got a good—"

He stopped suddenly and his mouth dropped open. From the back of the truck a high-pitched voice said, "Me savvy strong fella. My word! Catch'um Tari-tari Bay short time little bit."

Pinky smiled triumphantly. "There yuh

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are, Luke. He says Tari-tari Bay is just around the corner."

"Joseph's teeth!" Luke said. "As if I didn't have enough trouble already! What's that old cannibal doing in the back of my truck? I might of had sense enough tuh know there was something funny going on when you go to the trouble to lace up the back curtain."

"It was them trees the top kick was talkin' about, Luke." Pinky cleared his throat a little nervously. "Joe had a case of TNT he stole from the Engineers an' I figured we could save ourselves some work. Only he wouldn't loan it to me unless he could come along, too."

Luke choked. "You mean to tell me we've been cartin' around a hundred pounds of TNT in the back of the truck—an' the way *you* drive?"

"Aw, yuh don't need to worry none," Pinky said. "Joe's been sittin' on it to hold it down."

"What's the use?" Luke said in a morose voice. "I've got two strikes on me the minute you show up. Turn into that road, useless, and from now on you drive like you were running over eggs."

THE sandalwood road was worse than the one they had left, and the first sergeant had not been mistaken when he had said that they might have to chop their way through. The wheel tracks which Luke had seen back at the intersection had belonged to a jeep which could go places a two-and-a-half ton truck couldn't go and there was nothing to do but use the saw and the axes. Pinky mentioned the TNT, but Luke booted him into silence on that subject. While the two of them worked Joe sat on the tail board of the truck spitting betel juice and grinning amiably.

It was late afternoon when they finally worked their way out onto a rocky ridge from which they could see the gray water of Tari-tari Bay through the rain. They had just cut their twentieth foot-thick tree out of the way and Luke was heading for the cab of the truck when he stopped and swore morosely. One of the front tires of the truck was flat.

Pinky joined him. "Oh-oh!" he said.

"Everything happens to me," Luke mumbled hoarsely. "Now this! Get the spare while I start jackin' it up."

Pinky started walking rapidly toward the back of the truck and there was something in his gait that aroused Luke's suspicions.

"We've got a spare, haven't we?"

"Yeah, we got one," Pinky said in a subdued voice, "only it's back at camp. Yuh see, I—"

Luke was kneeling on Pinky's chest and bumping his head up and down on the ground when the jeep rolled to a stop a few yards away. Captain ap Kern got out and stalked up. He cast a cold eye at Joe, sitting in the back of the truck, and at the two soldiers who, covered with mud, had scrambled to their feet.

"Never mind the explanations, Corporal," Captain ap Kern said in a frigid voice. "We won't go into the details as to why you came down here to this God-forsaken spot when you were told to go to the head of Tari-tari Bay or why I find you fighting with a private or why you have been riding civilians around in your truck in violation of standing orders. All that will be brought out later—at the trial."

Luke gulped. "Yes, sir," he said.

"All that I want you to do now is to load that equipment, which you were supposed to have delivered to me four hours ago, into the jeep and then come with me."

"Yes, sir."

Captain ap Kern shifted his gaze to Pinky Kew's mud-draped figure, eyeing him distastefully. Pinky stood at attention and gazed off into the distance.

"As for you, Private Kew," ap Kern said, "you will repair that tire and then deliver the truck to the head of Tari-tari Bay after which you will consider yourself in arrest. For your information, *that* is the head of Tari-tari Bay."

Captain ap Kern pointed an aristocratic finger toward a gap in the trees. Across some three miles of gray water a rocky headland showed dully through the rain and Pinky turned to stare at it with a fascinated gaze. He was still gazing as the jeep turned around and headed back along the road they had cut that afternoon.

"That fella strong fella too much," Joe said. "My word!"

—

DARKNESS had dropped in a smelly blanket over the cliff at the head of Tari-tari Bay. The rain had stopped a

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half hour before and that pleased Captain ap Kern. He said as much as he and the light detail crouched in the rocky shelter fifty yards from where the decoy light was located. Luke sat morosely off to one side, feeling himself to be an outcast. He, too, was under arrest.

"Well," said Captain ap Kern in a satisfied voice. "Turn the light on, Sergeant, and we'll see how it works."

The electrician sergeant, who had superintended installing the light, called into the darkness and a moment later the sound of the power plant—hidden safely back in the jungle—echoed against the rocks. The sergeant listened with a practiced ear until the engine had settled to a steady roar and then flipped a control switch.

Above the heads of the watching men a thin finger of light stabbed upward. The sergeant turned knobs on the controller and the finger of light moved jerkily up and down and swung in a short arc to either side.

"Hah!" Captain ap Kern said. "Perfect. Now all we've got to do is wait."

They were well hidden by the rocky wall but an imperceptible tenseness began to settle over the group. Even Captain ap Kern started as the sound of a racing truck engine bellowed above the power plant noise and a twin pair of headlights topped a little rise a hundred yards away and bore swiftly down on them.

"It's Kew," Captain ap Kern said angrily. "Corporal Dorgan!"

"Yes, sir," Luke said in a meek voice.

"Get out there and stop that idiot before he gives the whole show away!"

Fifty feet from the shelter Luke stripped off his raincoat and waved it frantically in the path of the approaching truck. The truck stopped and Pinky leaned out.

"That you, Luke?" he asked cheerfully.

Luke groaned. "Cut off those damn lights! Then get over into the trees. That sub is liable to start shootin' any minute!"

"Naw," Pinky said placidly. "I don't think so."

"You've done enough thinkin' for one day," Luke snarled, jerking open the cab door. "Get out of there before I—"

The words were ripped out of his mouth by a thunderclap which drove him against the cab. Down the bay a great gout of red flame shot skyward, lighting the cliffs.

"My God! What was that?" Luke gasped.

"The sub," Pinky told him, still in his placid voice. "After you left I an' Joe was takin' the inner tube down to the water so we could find the leak, an' here is this sub lyin' there hid in a little cove just as nice as you could want. So we fixed up a little booby trap of our own. I had the idea an' Joe did the work."

"What work?" Luke asked.

"Well, he was the one that swum out an' fastened that box of TNT to her propeller. We stuck caps all over that box an' figured that when the sub started up her engines one of 'em would get a good enough *whap* to start something."

A high-pitched voice chuckled from the darkness. "Mak'um *boom* strong fella. My word!"

* * *

Luke and Pinky paused outside the command post for a moment. In their pockets they each had fifty dollars in crisp, new bills. Old Lucillius Dulligan had shaken both by the hand and complimented them on their soldierly qualities. Now his voice still drifted to their ears through the corrugated iron walls.

"Hah!" old Lucillius was saying. "Now there's a pair of soldiers for you, ap Kern. Perfect examples of that split-second thinking that I was telling you about."

"Yes, sir," Captain ap Kern said.

"With nothing but a truck they blow off the tail of a submarine, capture thirty prisoners and don't even realize that they have done anything out of the ordinary. Did you hear what Private Kew said when I asked him why he did it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Because he didn't want some sergeant named McCarthy to win the pool—that's what he said. That's the kind of men I like to see, ap Kern. Quick-thinking, brave—and modest."

Outside the command post Pinky Kew fingered the bills in his pocket. He stared thoughtfully off through the trees for a moment, as though he was pondering old Lucillius Dulligan's statement.

"I guess I'll go down to the village," he said finally. "I sort of promised I'd give Joe another lesson."

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THE TAMPA TRAIL

MR. JUDGE JONES, who wasn't a judge at all but who could talk like one, especially when he was drunk, found Billy Webb at the bar of the three Aces. Judge Jones ordered a drink, which Billy paid for, and downed it; he ordered another drink, which Billy also paid for, and with that one in his hand he led the younger man to the far end of the bar.

"I'm just back from Tampa," he said in a husky whisper. "There was a couple of pure-bred Brahman bulls unloaded there yesterday."

Billy looked at him with immediate interest, and Judge Jones took half of his second drink. "They was shipped in for Doc Peabody," he said. "But Doc died a couple of weeks ago and the bank's took over his place and don't want the bulls."

He emptied his glass and slid it hopefully toward the bartender. Billy was thinking about the bulls and didn't shake his head, so the bartender refilled the glass, and again Billy paid.

When the bartender had moved away, Judge Jones said, "The steamship captain who brought in the bulls has got 'em on

Illustrated by Carl Pfeufer

From the darkness beyond the carts a gun cracked.

A tale of the Florida cattle country before the turn of the century

By

WYATT BLASSINGAME

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his hands and wants to get rid of 'em. That's why you can buy the two for eight hundred dollars."

"Pure-bred Brahmans," Billy said with reverence in his voice and his face dreamy. Then his eyes got suddenly wide. "Eight hundred dollars! I can raise that!"

"I figured you could," the old man said.

"But I'd have to drive steers to Tampa to sell. By that time. . . ."

"Ain't many folks in this country willing to pay eight hundred dollars for two bulls—and them liable to die before you get 'em home."

"These won't die," Billy said.

You could see the dream coming to life in his face—the dream of the big-horned, massive bulls, the healthy and fast-growing calves, the strain spreading through all his stock and making it superior to the wild scrub cattle of the Florida prairies. It was the dream he had lived by since childhood.

A door directly behind them opened and a redheaded man came out. He went past them hurriedly, a little furtively even, and Judge Jones glared at him. But Billy was dreaming of the Brahmans and did not notice.

"How old are they, Judge?"

"Two."

"I'm going to buy them!" Billy said. "That Devon died before I got any service from him. But young Brahmans. . . . This country ought to be home for Brahmans!" His hand clinched on the old man's arm and his eyes were alive in his face. "Come on! Let's get going!"

Judge Jones looked wistfully down at his glass. "All right," Billy said. "One more for telling me. Then we'll head for the ranch."

THE old man had his drink and they were about to leave when the door opened abruptly and Henry Hardikker was standing there, so close to Billy Webb that they blocked one another's path. One of them must give ground before Hardikker could come in or Billy Webb could leave. And now, all at once, it was quiet in the bar and every man there was watching them.

Hardikker was a big man, as big as Webb, and the two of them completely blocked the doorway. For a moment they stood there, looking at one another. Hardikker was wearing a gun and his flat gray eyes slid down Webb's body to his hips, saw that Billy was unarmed.

It was a simple situation. One of the men had to step aside; that was all. But it was a situation filled with suspense because of the natures of these men and because the place was public and everyone would see who gave ground. Billy Webb felt a little foolish. This feud was none of his making, but, because he was scarcely more than a boy, and because the feud had been forced on him, he had to live up to it.

Before the tension had gone too far, the older man stepped aside, bowing, and smiling with his mouth, although his eyes stayed flat and hard.

"Rushing home to look after that expensive Devon bull of yours, Billy?" he said. He said it loud enough for the men in the bar to hear him, and there was laughter as Billy went out. They all knew the Devon was dead, and most of them had told him at the time he was a fool to try to bring high-bred cattle into this tick-ridden country.

There was a high moon and the shadows of the horses made dark splotches on the sandy street as Billy and old Mr. Judge Jones rode out of the town.

"I don't like the way Henry Hardikker acted back there," Judge Jones said. "He was wearing a gun—and he ain't the man to give up an advantage like that unless he thinks he's going to get a better one."

"You're always looking for trouble," Billy said.

"The trouble with you," Judge Jones said, "is you got no temper. You don't get mad. You know this country ain't big enough to hold you and Henry Hardikker both, and you know he knows it. You know he means to get you, and it don't matter to him how. More than one man who quarreled with Henry Hardikker has rode out on the prairie and never come back."

"A man takes his chances," Billy Webb said. "It doesn't help to get mad."

THEY were riding through pines now and the moon-cast shadows struck black bars across the horses. Somewhere a whippoorwill cried faintly against the

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heat and off to the south a bobcat howled.

"I'll build a couple of new stalls to the barn," Billy Webb said. "I'll keep them there, at least till they get set to the country."

"Ahhh!" Judge Jones said. "Can't you think of nothing but those bulls? You're worse than your daddy was."

"I reckon I learned it from him," Billy Webb said, "I can't help it."

"There never was a better man. Though most folks around here think he was a little crazy."

"That's one reason I want those Brahmans," Billy said. "I'll show folks who's crazy."

James Webb had been a big, ready-laughing man who did well with a seedling orange grove until, suddenly, in middle life, he had become possessed with the idea of raising fine cattle on the Florida ranges. He had spent his money wildly, impractically, on thoroughbred stock—and had watched it killed off by fever ticks, insects, and heat. He had sold his grove and bought more stock, and watched it die. He had taken to gambling in an effort to raise more money, and he hadn't been a good gambler. Before he died he had been reduced to driving a medicine wagon about the country, happy when he could stand and talk cattle rather than sell medicine.

"I'll show them!" Billy Webb said. "This ought to be the greatest cattle-raising country in the world. Look at it!" The sweep of his arm took in the whole vast country, table-flat beneath the moonlight and the pines. "Grass the year around! No need for winter shelters! A thousand lakes and creeks for every mud puddle in the whole west. Never short on water!" He turned in the saddle and his face was alive now. "But we've got to raise something that's got more beef on it than horns!"

"You've done all right with the native stock," Judge Jones said. "You've done well enough to scare Henry Hardikker into thinking maybe you're going to be a bigger man than he is. And that's enough to make him hate you, if he didn't already. He's never got over giving you your start."

They both laughed then, the sound so loud that a great horned owl flapped out of a tree ahead of them, monstrous against the sky for a moment before it disappeared. "A seventeen-year-old boy bluffing Henry Hardikker out of a hand of poker, then using the money to buy cattle and go in competition with him!" The old man's voice sobered. "That was eight years ago. Henry can hold a grudge a long time. But he's got a name for paying off."

"I can take care of myself," Billy Webb said.

"Maybe. He's no smarter than you. But he's crookeder, and he hates better."

IT TOOK Billy and old man Jones and two riders the better part of four days to make the drive. Billy's eighteen-foot cow whip cracked and banged about the stragglers, pushing them ahead, and the catch dogs ran down the strays. And at last the cattle were in the corral at Tampa and the money was in Billy Webb's pocket.

"Now," he said, "let's go see that steamship captain."

Judge Jones shifted his weight to the other foot and tried to spit and couldn't. His mouth had been getting constantly dryer these last four days. "You go see him," he said. "I—I got to get me a pair of shoes, if you can let me have ten dollars—"

Billy gave him the money. "What bar will I find you in?" he asked.

The old man grinned. "You won't have no trouble. Just stand in the middle of the street and listen."

"I'm going to want you sober in the morning," Billy said. The thought of the bulls had him excited, and grim too. The only real thoroughbred he had ever bought before was the Devon, and it had died. And folks had said he was as crazy as his father had been. But nothing was going to happen to these Brahmans. Billy had seen them in the corral and had stared at them with his eyes afire in his sunburned face and a hard lump in his chest.

He found the steamship captain in the lobby of the Jefferson Davis hotel, a short fat man with a stub pipe in his mouth. "Those hump-backed creatures from hell," the captain said. "I sold them yesterday—and damn glad to be rid of 'em."

"Sold them?" Billy said. He felt as though he had been struck over the heart and could not breathe.

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"A man named Hardikker," the captain said. "Henry Hardikker. From somewhere over toward the middle of the state."

Billy turned away, but the captain stopped him. "Your name Webb?" he asked.

"Yes."

"This fellow Hardikker said you might come to see me. He said if you did, send you to him. He's got a room here in the hotel."

IT WAS after midnight when Billy found Judge Jones at the bar of the Sailors' Refuge. The old man was in fine fettle. He held a bottle aloft and said, "Don't ask me to retreat from the goal I set myself, Billy. Don't stop me. Ah no! In the words of Jefferson Davis, 'All we ask is to be let alone.' "

"You've got to be sober in the morning," Billy said. "Hank and Mawery are going to stay here a few days. We've got to take the bulls back alone."

Judge Jones sighed. "Just one more." He emptied his glass with a gulp, set it on the bar, and started to fill it again.

"No," Billy said.

The Judge put the bottle down. "You're right," he said mournfully. " 'May I govern my passion with absolute sway, and grow wiser and better as my strength wears away.' But if it was left to me, I'd rather not."

They went out. The street was dark except for moonlight. Judge Jones began an oration on changing the name of Arkansas, but halfway through he lost the thread of it and gave up. He linked his arm in Billy's. "You got the bulls all right?"

"I got them."

Something in Billy's voice made the old man stop and stare at him. "You don't seem so all-fired pleased about it."

"I'll tell you about it tomorrow."

"I'm sober enough. What happened?"

"Henry Hardikker bought the bulls yesterday. I bought them from him."

"For how much?"

"Thirteen hundred dollars."

"So that's it." They started walking again and Judge Jones' step was steadier now. "How'd Henry know about those bulls?"

"I don't know. But he knew I was after them. That's why he bought them."

"It was that skunk Red Sanders. He heard me telling you about them. That's what Henry was so all-fired pleased about when y'all ran together leaving the Three Aces." And then the old man stopped and turned and took Billy by the arm. "Those steers you brought here didn't fetch that much," he said. "What did you give him for the balance?"

"A mortgage."

"What on?"

"My place and stock."

"On the house, the stock? The bulls too? Everything you've got?" He saw the confirmation in Billy's face. "You're stark, raving crazy!"

"I've got a year. I'll pay it off."

"He's trapped you!" the old man said. "He's trapped you sure as hell fire's for sinners! You'll never pay him off. He'll make sure of that."

"Those were his only terms. And I wanted the Brahmans."

Judge Jones shook his head. "And folks thought your daddy was crazy," he said.

IT WAS a long, slow trail home, and from the very first things went wrong. The bulls were loaded in two ox-drawn carts, with Judge Jones driving the first, Billy the second, their horses following and the catch dogs circling about. And that first morning, before they were an hour out of town, the rain started. There was no wind, only rain, solid and gray and hard. The catch dogs slunk back to the carts and walked beneath them. By noon water had filled the ruts of the trail; by sundown the earth was a shallow ocean out of which loomed the wiregrass and the palmettos and palms, amorphous and weird through the gray rain.

They made camp that night in a clump of cabbage palms so thick it was almost like a shelter. "I hope rain ain't bad for those creatures," Judge Jones said. "After you've spent everything you own, and probably your own life to get them."

"Why would he try to kill me?"

"There ain't a better way he could make sure you don't pay back the five hundred." The old man leaned to turn a piece of roasting meat. The fire shone hot in his face. "And you still ain't mad, Billy."

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"He beat me fair," Billy said.

"Maybe. But keep your gun handy."

There was no dawn the next day, only a grayness that seemed to come from the rain itself. Creeks were almost impossible to ford, and one of the bulls had developed a cough and stood with its head drooping, swaying from side to side with the rough bumping of the cart. Billy walked beside the cart now more than he rode, slogging through the ankle-deep water, his eyes anxious on the bull.

The rain thinned out. The wind blew hard, shifted into the north, and stopped, and, through the thinning rain they saw the sun, orange-colored between the pines.

Billy said, "Thank God!" and his voice was huskier than he realized.

BUT the next morning the sun was worse than the rain had been. It did not climb into the sky; it seemed to move flat across the heavens, blazing hot. From the flooded prairie steam rose in clouds.

By afternoon mosquitoes had come out of the hiding places to which the rain had driven them. The oxen plodded on, unheeding, but in the carts the bulls began to lash about with their tails and to bellow.

"I reckon they ain't used to mosquitoes," Billy said.

"Then they better get used to them."

They were walking beside the second team of oxen. From here Billy could crack his eighteen-foot cattlewhip over either team with a sound louder than a pistol shot. He kept it banging in an effort to stir the oxen into a faster pace. In the carts the huge bulls moved restlessly, striking about with their horns at the unseen, stinging enemy.

Smoke helped keep the mosquitoes off that night, with Billy awake and keeping the fire going, keeping the smoke billowing out of it. By morning his eyes were bloodshot. That day, with the carts rolling again, he stumbled along beside the carts, waving palmetto fronds for fans.

"I'll keep the fire going tonight," Judge Jones said when they had finally made camp.

All about them the mosquitoes were a dull, steady humming. Even close to the campfire, purposely smoky, there was no steady relief from them. The bulls bellowed and stamped in their carts. The dogs stayed close to the campfire. The horses were restless.

"I'll keep it going," Billy said.

"What you'll do is kill yourself."

"I'm all right."

"Sure," Judge Jones said. "The bulls may be all right, but you ain't." He dumped a handful of coffee into the bucket of boiling water. "You can't keep babying those bulls forever. If they can't live in this climate, they can't."

"They've got to get used to it. Mosquitoes ain't this bad once a year. And these bulls are young. Give 'em a chance."

Judge Jones insisted on taking his turn with the fires. But he was an old man, tough but old, and he was tired. He sat down to rest. His eyes closed, his chin sank on his chest. Gently he rolled over on one side, sleeping.

He awoke suddenly, jerking bolt upright. "Billy!" he yelled.

"Here I am." He was standing on the opposite side of the fire. "What's wrong?"

"I just dreamed Henry Hardikker was trying to kill you!"

"You're always dreaming something," Billy said.

"And generally having it come true! You know that. You be careful!"

"I'll be careful," Billy said. The smoke wavered up across his face. The light of the fire shone on it and his sunken eyes glowed. "I'm going to get the bulls home safe, and I'm going to pay off that mortgage," he said.

Looking at him, the old man said, "I reckon you will, too—if it can be done." but he put faith in his dreams. He was afraid.

THE next day began clear and treacherously pleasant. At dawn a breeze sprang up that drove away most of the mosquitoes and broke the heat. Sun and sandy soil had sucked up the rain by now and the footing was dry. The carts rolled on steadily.

The sun was almost set when Judge Jones said, "We'll make it tomorrow."

And then they heard a deep, rumbling roar like the sound of a train heard far off. It filled the whole sky with sourceless throbbing, and the men stared about them, unable to tell even the direction from which the sound came. The horses whinnied in

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terror. A catch dog which had gone on ahead came streaking back toward them, tail low as it ran.

They were crossing flat, open ground where there were no trees, only a scattering of palmettos, but a mile or so to the south a cypress swamp rose like a black wall against the sky. And as they watched the wall moved, began to grow, spread out across the whole sky, sweeping toward them with a slow, increasing roar.

"Here they come!" Jones screamed. "These bulls'll go crazy! They'll break out of the carts—if they ain't killed!"

"Put the carts together," Billy said. His heart was pounding. The horses tied to the rear of the carts had begun to plunge and kick. They knew what that dark, sweeping cloud meant, but the bulls didn't. They had turned to face it, heads raised.

"Get a fire going," Billy said. "I'll try to thatch the off sides of the carts, and the tops, as much as I can."

As he cut an armful of palmetto fronds he watched the black cloud roll forward. Then, as he worked to wall up the sides of the carts, the cloud swarmed onto them, no longer a single mass but an uncountable horde of horseflies. They attacked the animals more than the men, but their bite, to man and animal alike, was like the cut of a knife. They drew blood from the hands and faces and necks of the men and from the bellies of the animals. The bulls roared and plunged.

"They're going to break out!" Jones shouted. "And when they do. . . ."

When they did they would go mad. They would have no protection from the flies at all. Billy had seen bulls and horses killed by a swarm of flies before this. The native cattle had developed their own methods of protection. He had seen whole herds of a thousand or more massed together, tails sweeping in unison, bodies pushed side by side so that the flies could not get at them. He had seen milk cows rush out of the woods into their home lot and lie flat for the chickens to pick the flies from them.

But the smoke of the fire was growing thicker now, and the walls of palmetto fronds, on the off sides of the carts, were getting more solid. The flies had to go through the smoke to get at the bulls, and with an old croker sack Judge Jones had made crude protectors for the horses' bellies.

The sun was down now. The twilight faded swiftly, and with the daylight the horseflies disappeared. There were only a few left, and then there was none. The night lay dark and quiet upon the prairie.

"But they'll be back with sunup," Judge Jones said.

"And we'll be ready for them." Drops of blood showed on Billy Webb's smoke-stained, whiskered face. The sharp edges of the palmettos had cut his hands, and the hands of the old man too, but neither of them had noticed. "I'm riding home tonight. I can make it there and back by daylight. And I'm going to bring back enough sacks, bed quilts, something, so we can make hoods for the bulls and the horses, and the oxen too. We may get home looking like ghosts, but I'll get these bulls there alive."

THERE was no moon that night. Billy pushed his horse as hard as he dared across the flat, limitless country, through the vast reaches of scrub pine, through the occasional hammocks where moss-hung oaks loomed blacker than the sky, past the thickets of palmetto and palm. And by midnight he was freshly mounted and headed back.

Day was only a gray shadow in the east when he saw the campfire again. The fire was burning brightly and he wondered how the old man had stayed awake.

"Hey, Judge!" he called.

There was no answer and all at once he thought: *Something's happened to the bulls! They've got away!* He kicked his horse into a reckless gallop, plunged through the circle of cabbage palms, and pulled up beside the fire.

The old man was sitting there—and even as Billy reined in his horse he screamed, "Look out! Back of the carts!" At the same instant he kicked out with both feet and sent a burning log rolling toward the horse.

The horse plunged crazily. From the darkness beyond the carts a gun cracked once, then again.

Billy went out of the saddle head first. He hit rolling and a bullet threw dirt in his face. Then he was out of the firelight, right hand sweeping back to his holster.

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The holster was empty. The gun had fallen from it.

Billy and the gunman both saw the pistol where it lay at the edge of the firelight, not far from Judge Jones. But Jones' hands were tied behind him, and the gunman, sure of himself now, moved into the open. He circled slowly toward the palm where Billy hid. He leveled his gun.

Billy Webb laughed aloud. He had already unwrapped the cattlewhip from about his waist. His right arm flicked back and forward again and the crack of the lash was loud as the mingling gunfire.

Standing up, coming from behind his tree and going toward the blinded killer, Billy Webb said, "I never was much of a hand with a gun anyhow; but I was born with a cattlewhip in my fist."

HE WAS driving a wagon now with old Judge Jones at his side. He tied the horses in front of the Three Aces and they went in, past the bar, and on into the room at the back where five men were playing poker. One of them was Henry Hardikker. Seeing Billy, Hardikker's face paled and his jaw muscles went slack.

Billy Webb said, "I've come to pay off that mortgage, Henry." He took five hundred dollars from his pocket and counted it out upon the table. "It's the money you gave Red Sanders to murder me. Red gave it to me—at least, you might put it that way." He turned to one of the other men. "Red's in my wagon out front, Doc. He'd like for you to fix him up."

He turned back to Hardikker. "You can give me that mortgage now, Henry."

Hardikker gave it to him and Billy folded it and put it in his pocket. Then his hands dropped at his sides and he stood there, looking down at the other man. He was beginning to breathe hard now, his nostrils flaring, and his face, little by little, growing whiter beneath its deep sunburn.

"Henry," he said. "Henry, I just found out something from Red Sanders." The thinness got the better of his voice and he had to stop for a moment. The muscles in his throat worked. "I just found out how come that Devon bull of mine died. You had him poisoned."

"That's a lie," Henry Hardikker said. "I swear. . . ." A nerve was twitching at the corner of his mouth and his eyes had fear in them. "I'll show you I never. . . ." Then his hand flashed up with a gun in it and the gun was blazing even before it was level with Billy Webb's body.

There was a gun on Billy Webb's hip. He never reached for it. He went straight across the table, headlong, at Hardikker.

Several minutes later old Judge Jones ran out on the porch of the bar, yelling, "Hey, Doc! Hey, Doc! You better leave Red and come in here quick!"

"What's wrong?" the doctor asked.

"Billy Webb's done finally got mad," Jones said. "We managed to pull him off Henry, and now Henry's moaning to get out of the country. But he's going to need your services first."

The Story of Fighting Ships

4. The Frigate

THE sleek, fast, three-masted sailing ship known as the frigate, the grand-daddy of the present-day cruiser, has a very special place in the annals of the United States Navy. When three of them were launched in 1797, to protect our merchant shipping against the ravages of Algerian pirates, an Act of Congress had stated specifically that there was no intention of inaugurating a permanent navy—but that is exactly what resulted. In the action filled years that followed they served their purpose too honorably and well to be thrown into the discard.

In European navies, frigates, carrying from 24 to 44 guns, had been proving their worth for well over a century. Their speed and handiness and moderate size made them specially useful as scouts and destroyers of commerce. By the middle of the 18th Century frigates had become a standard class of vessel, coming next to ships of the line. They carried their main armament of 18-pounders or 12-pounders on a covered deck, with additional guns (6-, 9-, or 12-pounders) on the poop and forecastle. The rigging was that of a ship of the line, with three masts, square-rigged on all. Tonnage varied from 500 to 1200 generally, and some of the United States frigates were even larger.

The *Constitution,* sometimes called *Old Ironsides,* probably the most famous vessel in the annals of our Navy, was one of the three frigates commissioned in 1797. She served gallantly through the Barbary Coast difficulties, but it was in the War of 1812 that she was to reach the height of her fame. Twice in the first year of that war, she slugged it out with powerful British fighting ships, the *Guerriere* and the *Java,* until they struck their colors. Our navy was still numerically weak, but from that year on our sea power was respected by other maritime nations the world over.

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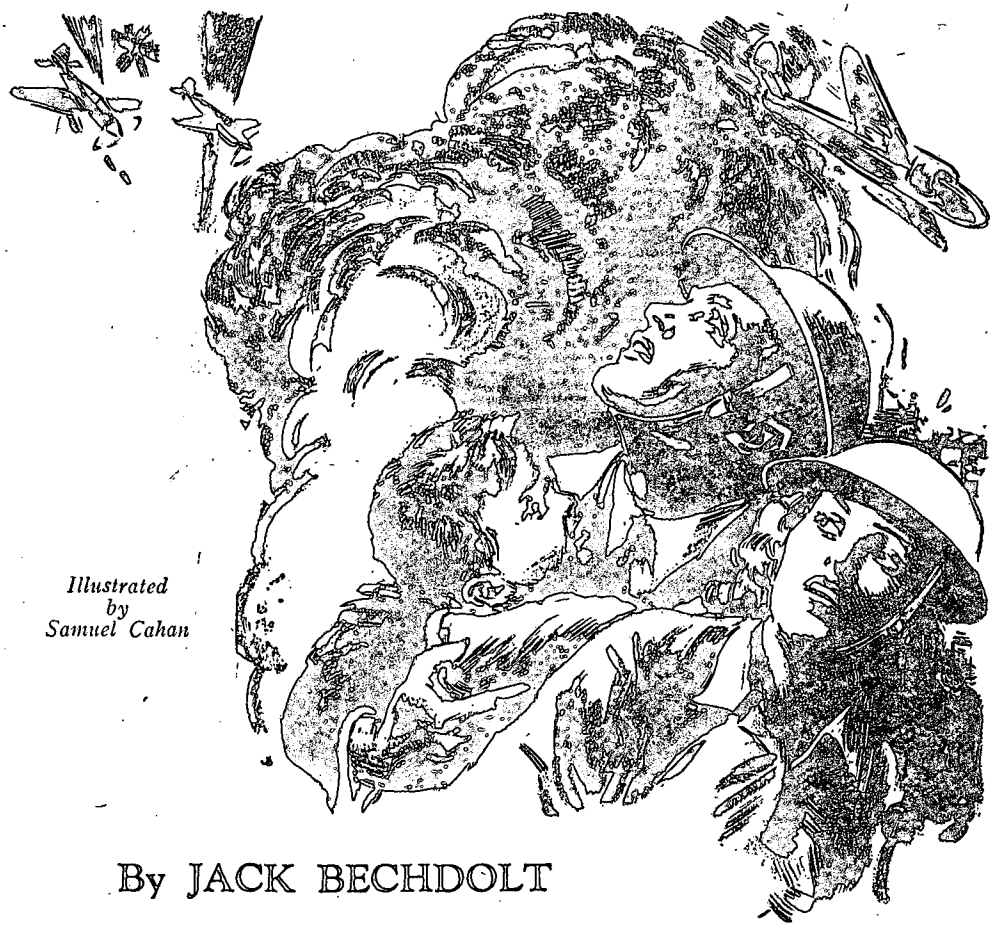
Wings Over New York



Illustrated by Samuel Cahan

By JACK BECHDOLT

IT WAS 10:55, Eastern war time, a night of alternate stars and scudding clouds, with the subways rumbling underfoot, the busses roaring on the surface and business as usual all over sprawling, dimmed-out New York.

For the flight of bombers droning westward over the gray Atlantic zero hour was near. It was near, also, for a tall, blond man with deepset eyes who waited for a message in his city apartment; it was zero hour for Jim Franklin, deputy commander, Sector 2, ARW.

Luck had cruised with the Nazi carrier from the moment of her sneak run out of Norwegian waters until, one hundred and fifty miles offshore, the fighters and bombers fled screaming from her flight deck and headed west. The luck of the blitz still perched upon their gray wings. Empty ocean and empty sky; fine flying weather and the richest city in the world fixed in their bomb sights.

In his flat on a lower West Side street of Manhattan the blond man studied his wristwatch. His name was Konrad. He was one of a number scattered at strategic points, all waiting tensely for the hour and minute.

Zero!

When the yellow signal came through, Sector Two thought it was just another practice alert

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He whispered, "So!" He looked at the sky. "A fine night for it." He smiled.

His leather jacket had a civilian defense brassard fastened to its sleeve. He caught up an air warden's white helmet and went out into the weather to carry out his share of a plan conceived in the Wilhelmstrasse.

JIM FRANKLIN shoved at the door of what had been a long-vacant little grocery store. The sign in the window now read, *Air Warden Service, Sector Two, Open 24 Hours A Day.* Nobody could read the sign at night because the windows were blacked out and the place looked abandoned.

The deputy commander of this particular sector was in no pleasant humor. He had just come from an argument with Police Captain McGroarty, precinct commander.

"Give me wardens—men wardens, McGroarty. It's a man's job. Bombs, poison gas, incendiaries! The next time you send me a candidate for the Miss America Beauty cup I'm going to slam her right back at you!"

McGroarty laughed until the station house shook with his mirth. "G'wan and tell that to your chorus of Rockettes! If heaven and the commissioner pleases to send us she wardens then it's shes you'll get. And see to it you train 'em to do a man's job."

"And that," said Jim, "is what is called coöperation by the police department!"

Jim Franklin was no woman hater, but how could any one human being give air-raid protection to a tough tenement and warehouse sector when the army took all his eligible men as fast as they learned their job and left him what McGroarty called his Rockettes? Fine girls, all of them, but no match for some of the grim facts of life along West Street. There was one in particular—his newest recruit. In case of real trouble she would last about as long as a kitten in hell.

The object of his thoughts was the first thing his eyes fell upon as he entered the sector office.

She was seated at a desk that was cluttered with telephones, letter baskets, calendars, a tin alarm clock—and a sewing basket! She had been darning stockings and several were draped about the desk.

She was twenty and she looked about sixteen, dwarfed by her shrapnel helmet and dressed in an overall. Her hair was a rich auburn, her eyes golden brown and darkened by worry. When she saw who came in, she gave a relieved smile.

"Mr. Franklin, I'm so glad to see you. There hasn't been a soul in here for an hour and I was getting scared!"

"Scared? Nothing to be scared about, Miss Avery." He had to speak sharply because his impulse was to pat her hand and say, "Look, Jim's right here to take care of you, honey." That sort of conduct is ruled out by the ARW.

"My relief didn't come. I was left here all alone."

She had been assigned to the office watch with no other duty than to answer a telephone and relay preliminary raid warnings if any came from the police. All the new recruits took that assignment, the first step in their training. She had a nice, warm office to sit in and her sewing to amuse her, and she got scared!

"It gets awfully still and lonesome around here," she explained. "I got to thinking about all the dreadful things that might happen—saboteurs, or—"

"Look," said Jim very patiently. "Right beside you is a schedule of the watches. It says that Mr. Konrad takes over at ten o'clock. And there's his telephone number. If you had called him—"

"I did!" Tess Avery cried. "I called him three times. He didn't answer."

Jim picked up the telephone and dialed Konrad's number. He frowned and said, "He doesn't answer. Funny. He's one of our most dependable men."

He had a little stock lecture for occasions like this and he gave it to Tess Avery now.

"In this outfit, women rank exactly with men. If you stay on this job, you've got to get tough."

"Yes," she agreed meekly. "I will."

"All right. You'd better run along home now. I'll take over." He added gruffly, "If you want to wait till I get a relief man, I'll be walking your way."

This was sheer weakness; he had no business chaperoning girl wardens. He reached for the telephone impatiently. The instrument beat him to it with a loud, insistent ring.

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FROM far off-shore across the tumbling, gray Atlantic surges a voice spoke to First Interceptor Command.

"Unidentified planes, flying high."

On Long Island an officer snapped a button. At air fields yellow lights glowed; motors began to warm up.

Telephone operators plugged in city warning centers. The teletypes got busy with the story. Radios in cruising police cars murmured, "All cars. Air raid warning. Yellow."

In blacked-out hiding places trained personnel began to place toy planes on big plotting boards, working out the threatening pattern from the spate of army flashes.

"Precinct headquarters," said the telephone at Jim's ear. "Air raid warning yellow at 11.05."

"Warning yellow, 11.05," he checked.

"Warning yellow 11.05 okay," the phone repeated.

They stared at each other. Tess's eyes were dilated, dark with excitement. But her voice was steady. "I'll call the posts out." Both began a chain of alerting messages.

Before they had finished making calls people began to arrive: the sector commander to take over, a woman who obviously had been washing her hair and now wore a towel like a turban; a breathless fat man whose sleep-puffed eyes blinked at the lights. "It never happens before I get to sleep," he wheezed. "They do it on purpose."

Then the first sirens lifted their cry, swiftly followed by the others—screaming over the city.

In the dead silence between sirens they looked at each other. The fat man continued his plaint: "It's a dirty trick, pulling practice alerts this time of night."

"If it *is* a practice," commented the girl in the towel turban.

Jim's work was cut out. He had the posts to inspect, all the field work. He touched Tess's shoulder. "You stay with me. I may need a messenger. Let's go."

They pushed through the light trap into the street. The gooseneck lamps and traffic lights were gone. The rows of houses were vague, black shapes fading into the blackness of night, all save one belated window a block distant. Under it a warden's whistle was shrilling indignantly. An uncanny hush fell over the tensed, waiting city. Overhead the sky was checkerboarded with restless pencils of blue searchlight.

Their footfalls seemed a sacrilege in that quiet. Jim's steps were long, unhurried, but swift. Tess trotted at his side, glancing up at him in that trustful, disquieting way of hers.

Out of the south came a chorus of shrieking motors that passed over them unseen. Uptown, strings of magnesium flares began to drift down. The great pillar of the Empire State building caught the sizzling light and glowed, a shining target. They paused to stare and felt the rock of Manhattan quiver underfoot with the dull thud of distant explosions.

The flares winked out, but a red light leaped higher, tinting the edges of the low clouds. The fires seemed to be around Times Square.

"Practice alert, hell!" Jim said.

HE KEPT a tight grip on Tess's arm. He could hear her teeth grating. What could you expect of a girl who hadn't even finished her basic training! Of course she was scared. So was he.

"Look," he said. "An air warden's job is to be Johnny-on-the-spot where trouble breaks out so he can report it quick and get the right services on the job. And in order to do that he's got to stay alive. If anything starts upstairs you dive into the nearest doorway or wherever you're safe and stay there until it's over. Don't let me catch you trying to be a hero!"

"I'm not to help if I see somebody in trouble?"

"Not if you run any risk."

"And you—you won't either?"

"Not if it was my best friend. Those are our orders. See that you obey them."

The raiders circled south again and the snarl of their approach became a shrieking bedlam. A horrible whistling thing raced out of the sky.

He fell to his knees and dumped Tess beside him. "Keep your mouth open! Here, bite on my sleeve." He forced her down into the gutter and tried to cover her small body with his own.

The shrieking dragged on and on, growing in volume. When the bomb struck the

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actual explosion was anti-climax. The back draft lashed at them and all Manhattan Island seemed to tip up on end. Then silence and the deliberate *crump-crump* of falling walls.

It had seemed black before. Now it was an opaque, absolute black that could be felt and tasted. Jim scrambled up awkwardly, dragging her after him. The dust cloud was beginning to stir and thin and a pinkish light illumined it, showing them each other's faces, so deeply plastered with dust they were strangers.

He tried for something normal and reassuring. Grasping her arm again he repeated, "Remember, no heroics! No Hollywood trimmings—"

His jaw dropped and his eyes bulged. There had been a red brick row on that block, old-fashioned single family residences tucked in between modern apartment buildings. But not private houses now.

The bomb had exposed them. The front walls lay in the street, a mountain of rubble. What was left was like a doll's house. The floors, wedged between party walls, stood intact. Furniture was in place, every detail looked ordered, but there were no more secrets from the world. In one room a spitting blue-white light flooded up; draperies began to flare.

They saw it only an instant before they saw the child. He was not yet three years old and clad in white woolly pajamas. He was alone and struggling down the stair from the third story. Every step was a problem for his small legs and directly in his path lay the spitting kilo-magnesium bomb, showering sparks.

Jim began to climb the hillocks of brick and mortar. The brownstone steps sagged crazily. He went up hand over hand, hurdled a shattered front door and clumped up the stair.

On the second floor the stairs were beginning to burn. Tess saw him dodge around the spitting bomb. She screamed and pointed.

THE house, or what remained of it, stood next to one of the apartment buildings, an eight-story affair. As the dust cleared she saw the apartment wall lean far out of plumb, hovering drunkenly above the little house. Jim couldn't see it, but by her pantomime he guessed something was about to fall.

He was still half the stair flight from the baby. He glanced down at her, waved impatiently and went on up.

The drunken wall was wavering. Cracks spread through it; loose bricks began to clump on the wreckage below. Tess scrambled over the rubble. Her arms were out to catch the child if he tossed it down. That might save a minute—and two lives.

Jim understood. He shook his head and ran lightly down the stair, swung over the rail out of the way of the fire and back to her the way he had gone in.

"Run like hell," he gasped and set a good example, the child in his arms. The toppling wall crunched down, and when the dust cleared there were only the heaped-up bricks and broken ends of floor beams and scattered fire.

She took the child from his arms. All this time it had not uttered a whimper. It lay snuggled against Tess's breast, arms clasped about her neck, but it only continued to stare. Shock had robbed it of speech.

"It will have to go to the welfare emergency station if we can't find its folks," Jim said: He looked at the rubble heap that had been a row of houses and knew there could not be anything living left there.

"Wait for me," he said and stripping off his coat, he wrapped the child in it.

Post wardens were arriving. Reports had to be sent, the street roped off, rescue vehicles directed to the spot. When he returned to Tess, she said: "It just won't talk, Jim! It's breaking my heart!"

"The Welfare people will fix that up. They're good at that. They'll trace down relatives or somebody to give the kid a home. We'll take him over there before anything else happens."

OUT of sight of the wrecked block the streets of silent warehouses were serene like the skies above. Once they saw something flaming fall from among the stars, but it was not a shooting star. It was far away and made no sound.

"I hope it's one of theirs," Jim muttered.

There was a burst of anti-aircraft fire. It grew louder and they heard the planes

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questing north again. Flashes of blue light and the thudding of bombs marked their approach.

"If they know what's stored around here we're in for a plastering," Jim said quietly.

He caught Tess's arm and dragged her into the doorway of a storage warehouse. When those planes got overhead there would be a rain of shrapnel and spent bullets, even if no bombs fell.

He was about to explain this to Tess when she cried out and stumbled. He stumbled at the same time—over a man's body.

The man lay dead in the open door of the building he guarded. Jim's torch picked out the shield pinned to his vest. He was the night watchman.

They stepped past him and into a cold, musty-smelling blackness. Anti-aircraft barked from the roofs of buildings nearby. There was a spatter like hail in the street, but more deadly than hail. They sat on the floor, the child between them and stared at the flashes that lighted the street.

Somebody was running; the heavy footfalls clattered through the warehouse. Jim's torch picked out a tall figure, identified as a warden by arm band and helmet.

"Konrad!" he shouted.

Konrad was out of breath. His deepset eyes glowed in the torch beam. Jim said: "You didn't show up for office watch tonight."

Konrad's lips twisted impatiently. "I had other business." He looked over his shoulder and clenched and unclenched his hands nervously.

"What about that watchman. You know he's dead?"

"I know. I saw the door standing open. I found the body. Nobody's in this building. I've been all over and all is in order. I will call police."

As he started toward the open door Jim leaped after him. "You can't go out there now. You'll be killed!"

He caught Konrad by the collar of his shirt and Konrad twisted like an eel. His fist struck the angle of Jim's jaw and drove him back spinning. Konrad leaped through the open door into the spattering shrapnel, stumbled, fell and lay sprawled face down under the deadly downpour.

For an instant Jim hesitated. This wasn't the case of a helpless baby. If Konrad was fool enough to risk his life . . . Jim crawled out of the door, got a grip on him and dragged him inside.

KONRAD had a superficial head wound and showed signs of reviving. Jim gave him a disgusted look. "What made him do a fool thing like that? He's the last man I'd pick to lose his head!"

"He's talking, Jim. What's he saying?"

"I can't make out."

Konrad sat up, his eyes rolling.

"It's all right," Jim told him. "Take it easy. You're back in the warehouse—"

"Fool! Pig-headed donkey!" Konrad shouted. "Get me out of here. Save yourselves—"

"Now, take it easy—"

"Do you know what's on the roof of this building? Flares! Magnesium flares to guide the Fuehrer's planes to their target! They're coming! They're coming now—"

The snarling song was growing louder. The planes were nearer!

"How do you know what's on the roof? What were you doing there?" Jim saw the answer in Konrad's eyes. *"You put them there!"*

With a feeling of sick horror, Jim understood what had happened in the warehouse. As a warden Konrad had no difficulty gaining entrance. Then he struck down the watchman and set the flares going to mark the target for the planes. A sweet target, warehouses bulging with engines and spare plane parts, waiting shipment overseas.

Something clutched Jim's leg. Konrad had wound his arms about it, raising his terrified face, begging Jim to get him out of there.

Jim kicked himself free. Then, before he could speak or move again, the howling bombs began to rain down. The floor tilted crazily. His arm about Tess, Jim fell flat and the last thing he remembered was trying to dig his fingernails into concrete as they slid into a crevass.

When Jim struggled back to clear consciousness, he found that he was lying underneath Tess. Her weight lay on his neck and face, nearly suffocating him. He wriggled away from her and managed

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to find his flashlight. He switched it on.

The tilting floor had slid them into a cellar. The party wall of the warehouse held up one end of the twisted beams, enough to fend the broken floor clear of them. They were in a sort of cave.

Tess sat up suddenly, her eyes wild. "Jim! The baby. . . ."

The baby was gone. It must have been torn from her arms in that final explosion that brought the floors down.

Tess began to tremble violently, close to hysteria. He put his arms about her and drew her close. She lay against his shoulder, shuddering and choking; but after a few moments she quieted.

"I'm all right, now," she said humbly.

"Good girl," he said. "Now let's try to get ourselves out of here." But they weren't going to get out of there, not by any exertion they were capable of. He knew that a few moments later. You can't pick a way through tons of concrete and twisted steel with your bare hands for tools. You couldn't make your cries for help heard even if there was anybody up above to hear them. He explained that to her.

"We'll be okay," he said. "We'll just sit snug down here till the rescue squad comes along. Some warden is sure to see what happened and—" He stopped to listen.

Water!

IT WAS gushing from a broken main somewhere nearby. It made ugly, sucking, gurgling noises as it seeped around the broken concrete. The cellar was filling with it.

"What is it, Jim?"

He put his arms about her and drew her close so she couldn't hear. If they had to drown she would know soon enough.

"Anyway, Konrad is paid off," he said with savage satisfaction. "No wonder he wanted to get out of this place. He got caught on his own target. I never was very good at wishing a man dead, but one man died tonight who deserved it!"

Tess's hands clutched at his heavy flannel shirt. "I'm awfully tired," she murmured. I think I could even go to sleep. Jim . . ." Her voice trailed off and she lay silent against him.

Jim made himself as comfortable as he could and held her gently. Probably she did not realize how hopelessly they were trapped here. She could relax, unknowing, and that was good; she was not suffering, anyhow. Gradually he felt himself relax, soothed by the tempo of her soft breathing. He could hear the water pouring in steadily, but that seemed no longer frightening. Strangely, the gurgling sound became a kind of lullaby.

He must have dozed a little, for the touch of the ice-cold water on his ankles brought him suddenly alert. One of Tess's toes was in the water, and he moved her around to keep her dry.

"Jim." Her voice was drowsy. "You needn't be so careful. I know about the water; I've been listening to it a long time. Jim, will it be long before—"

"Don't be silly. We're not going to drown. It will take days to fill this cellar. They'll dig us out in a few hours—"

"Will they?" She smiled at him. "You're darling, Jim!" She was struck by a new idea. "Water! At least I might wash my face. It must be a sight!"

She twisted about to reach the water. When he saw her face again it glowed.

She said softly, "A girl ought to look her best for the man she loves."

The lightness left her voice. She caught his hands. "It's true, Jim. I fell in love with you, long ago, when I joined the wardens. I don't mind telling you now because—well, I don't mind."

It was crazy telling her how much he loved her when there wasn't any hope of anything coming of it. It was crazy kissing her like that as if they had all the time in the world to plan a life together. But the world was all crazy—everything was crazy now.

Tess sighed and leaned against him, her fingers touching his cheek.

JIM sat up in the blackness, hitting his head against concrete. Water was up around his middle and the lower part of him was numb with cold. Water was lapping hungrily at Tess, huddled against him. He couldn't avoid the water now. They could not crawl any higher. They were just under the cellar ceiling.

Something like panic came over him. He wanted to swear and rave against the indecency of this death. He wanted to get

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his fingers around the throat of the perverted thing that condemned innocent civilians to die this way.

His torch darted its beam aimlessly. His attention fixed on a broken slab at which the flood was lapping. How soon would it cover that? Five minutes? Ten?

He began to count the seconds for lack of something better to do. Five minutes went by. And ten. The water hadn't changed.

He started to count again. Another five minutes and the water mark remained the same. No, it was dropping!

He rubbed his weary eyes. *Now take it easy. Get it right, this time!* Presently he whispered, "Well, I'll be damned!" The water was dropping!

A faint noise was filling the little cave. It called to his mind the picture of a street barrier and a gang of men ripping open pavement for some repair job, something commonplace that he had seen often in the safe, ordinary life he knew before war.

Compressed air drills, that was it!

They were playing a steady tattoo overhead, ripping the broken concrete into chunks that could be lifted away, drilling a path by which he and Tess might escape.

He shouted and shouted until he was breathless. Above the gurgle of receding water he heard an answering shout.

* * *

It was Police Captain McGroarty who greeted his return to the free world. "You can thank the kid for it," said McGroarty.

"What kid?" Jim started up from his stretcher.

"Take it easy, now. The kid ain't here. We took it off to the Welfare station. But it was finding the kid in here all alone and unharmed started us wondering. You see the little devil was wrapped up in your coat."

On a stretcher close beside Jim's Tess lay under blankets. By the light in her eyes he knew she had heard the news. Their hands reached out, bridging the space between the stretchers.

"If that kid doesn't find a home," Jim whispered, "what do you say we take him into our family?"

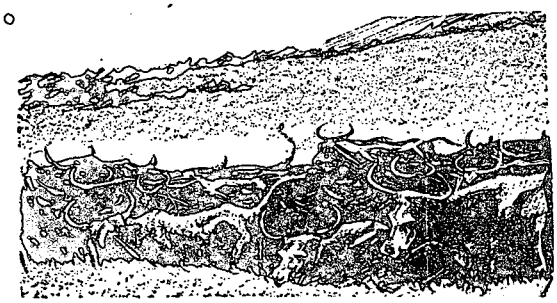
Beginning a smashing new novel by Leslie T. White—

"SIX WEEKS SOUTH OF TEXAS"

When Randy Dent took on the job of herding seven blooded Texas bulls from the Panhandle home ranch to Paradise Valley, deep in the lush fastnesses of Brazil's Mato Grosso, he guessed he'd meet trouble before the long trek was over and the stock safely corralled at the Estancia Figuereido on the Guarani Frontier. But there were some things he didn't reckon on—such as the reincarnation of the Lone Star state's palmiest days of range war and six-gun law!

* * *

The *Griffon* sailed on her maiden voyage from Green Bay in September, 1679, and neither ship nor crew were ever heard from again. The first sailing vessel ever to put forth on the uncharted waters of the Great Lakes, her fate has remained sealed for more than two and a half centuries. R. A. Emberg, in the fictional diary of John Harkness, builder of the ship, takes us aboard "The Phantom Caravel" and lets us watch the strangest marine mystery of all time seal itself before our eyes.



Plus: "The Devil Spider," by Francis Gott; "Grandfather's Secret Weapon," by Commander G. L. Lowis; "The Second Trap," by Gene Henry; "Give a Dog a Name," by A. H. Carhart; "Jungle Passport," by Kenneth Perkins; and other exciting stories to complete a great June issue of *Adventure!* On sale May 7th.

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THE PIRATE FROM VIRGINIA

A Story of Early New Orleans

By TOM ROAN

SHE came up-river in the April dawn, her tall mastheads smoking through the foggy gloom and her yards and braces running streams from the spasmodic squalls of rain. She had the outward look of an honest merchantman flying British colors, but colors and outward looks were often deceiving in 1770 when the Spanish in New Orleans were trying to rule a citizenry that wanted no part of His Royal Majesty's torture chambers and dungeons.

Illustrated by Charles Dye

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A close inspection of the *Gallant Rover's* lines and running-gear would have revealed that she had recently undergone extensive repairs. A new mizzen had been stepped. Great sections of her rails had been replaced. In several places shattered planks had been taken out and new ones bent and warped to her ribs, and there were stains and scars on her decks that holystoning could not remove. It had not been long since she had been beached and had her bottom scraped on a lonely island shore, to rid her of barnacles picked up in four long years of dark secrets and restless roving.

Captain Yarbel Zandor stood in his dripping cape near the quartermaster at the wheel. A Virginia gentleman of sorts, he was just turning thirty. He was tall and lean, as straight as a spar. His eyes were blue and keen, his hair sandy. So far both ball and blade had failed to mark his face.

The thought of his present mission did not make him relish the sight of two Spanish men-of-war riding at their anchors a couple of stone-throws offshore. He caught a glimpse of an officer on a quarterdeck studying the *Gallant Rover* through his glass, and Zandor felt a quick relief when another rainsquall swooped down to blot the ship from sight.

Now his sharp, appraising eyes sought Mr. Elbert Darby, his first officer. Darby was tall and thin, a sickly-looking man of forty-odd who had lost his right eye and his left leg halfway to the hip in a fight at sea only seven months before. It still surprised Zandor to see how this country schoolmaster had taken to the sea.

Zandor turned, speaking quietly to the quartermaster. The bow of the *Gallant Rover* nosed toward the opposite side of the river, then nosed back. The ship came around under her headsails like a hound on its heels. It was by no accident that Zandor brought her up with her nose downstream and a fair shift of current under her keel as men hurried aft to let go a pair of anchors over the stern. A couple of axes in strong hands could cut those giant hawsers while a gang on deck was shooting home the sails for a quick getaway in case of trouble. And trouble was a dead certainty here, for Yarbel Zandor had come here seeking it.

"Visitors coming upstream," Darby announced as he swung aft. "Eight of them in a craft no larger than our quarter boat with a strip of sail on it. Some little strut from the navy or one of the army shore batteries."

Zandor nodded. "You know what to say and do. So does the crew."

HE knew what Darby was thinking. There would be hell to pay if any of these Spanish birds got one look at what was in the *Gallant Rover's* hold. The ship appeared frightfully undermanned when judged by the crew Zandor allowed on the upper deck. She carried visible ports for only sixteen guns. But if the Spaniards went below they would discover that the ship was armed with forty-four guns, and they would find a hundred extra men in hiding down there.

The *Gallant Rover* carried enough cannon, powder, ball, muskets and pistols to fight almost any ship twice her weight. She also carried three hundred and eighty pounds weight of silver, seven thousand pounds of bar-lead, great bales of goods, and a strong-box choked and crammed to the lid with rare jewels.

Zandor had moved straight to his cabin and was working rapidly. From a drawer under the great table in the center of the cabin he had removed a slender round brush and a squat jar of thick, bright-red grease. Dot after dot of the stuff was going on his hands and face. Now and then he paused to sprinkle the dots with pulverized punk. In three minutes his face and hands looked as if they were covered with revolting scabs.

The noise on deck told him the boat had scraped alongside. A sword glinted and spurs clanked as men came down the wet runway. Then he heard Mr. Darby apologizing in his best Spanish.

"Very ill, Captain Carlos! You will understand why he did not personally meet a gentleman of your rank at the rail."

Darby and the man appeared a few moments later. Zandor arose as if by a supreme effort. As the Spaniard flung aside his cape to flash his fine uniform, Zandor got a moment's look at his face. It was round and swarthy, with a carefully trimmed black beard, mustaches curling around a dark beak of a nose, and sharp black eyes.

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"*Dios!*" hissed the Spaniard. "Fool, why did you not tell me! That man," his voice rose wildly, "has smallpox!"

"Really?" Darby was following the fleeing man out on deck. "There are twelve men down—"

A yell in Spanish cut him off. Men were fighting and clawing to get back to the boat overside, and Zandor grinned. Picking up a soft rag, he started cleaning his hands and face.

"Good work, I swear!" Elbert Darby laughed when he swung into the cabin and flopped himself in a chair. "When Pious Jones appeared on deck with some of your red grease on all those warts on his hands and face, those Spaniards turned into madmen! If they send a doctor aboard—"

"But they won't," Zandor grinned. "You couldn't drive a doctor aboard. I'll take a nap and go ashore."

"They won't let you!" Darby looked up quickly. "They'll line the river with soldiers. If any man or boat puts off—"

"The Spanish sometimes overdo themselves, Mr. Darby." Zandor cocked a cold blue eye on him. "We came here to take four innocent victims out of their bloody hands—and we'll take them! The fog will see me ashore and back."

"Back in Virginia," Darby said frowning, "I used to think you were the wildest blade that ever blew out of hell. I still think so. But ever since that merchantman off the Florida coast told you about the Whitehalls, you've been like a man possessed." The mate took a long breath and snorted. "The Whitehalls! Here you are setting out to rescue some people who'd send you to the gallows and delight in it! They ran you out of Virginia, they outlawed you; they drove you to sea. In addition, they've taken your fine lands. Why, damn them—"

"Mr. Darby," Zandor said quietly, "I'm going to take a nap. Keep your wits sharp. Allow but few men on deck."

HE SLEPT until the middle of the afternoon. Mr. Darby did not disturb him because the fog had lifted for a time. He could see soldiers on the bank of the river and sailors in small boats from the man-of-war lying about seven hundred yards downstream.

Covered by the afternoon fog, now so thick one could not see more than a dozen yards away, Captain Zandor and Tar Barrel, a giant Negro, eased themselves over the starboard rail in a mere cockleshell of a boat. Tar Barrel's great arms sent it shooting toward the western bank; then, raising a small sail, he headed the craft downstream.

Captain Zandor was dressed in his finest. There were two carefully primed pistols with silver-covered barrels and gold-inlaid ivory butts in his waistband. At his left side swung a cutlass, a weapon longer and heavier than the average. Under a black cape he wore a daring green coat gleaming with gold buttons and braid, the front of it cut neatly away at the waistline. His breeches were white, his boots gleaming black; his three-cornered hat had a Spanish elegance.

New Orleans was not much to look at in 1770. The French had ceded Louisiana to Spain in 1762. A wild revolt had taken place when the Spanish governor came in '66, only to find himself forcibly expelled and fleeing for his life. Governor Alexander O'Reilly had come in '69 to start butchering and hanging, and was still busy with his job. The town did not yet boast of more than five hundred houses and a civilian population of thirty-five hundred. More than a third of them were slaves.

Not until they were well below the men-of-war did Tar Barrel swing the boat toward the town. The light breeze stirring the fog was soon behind them. The big Negro lowered his sail and took to the oars again. Before long they were making a landing beside a line of steps coming down from the long back porch of a waterfront tavern perched on tall pilings.

It was just the place Zandor wanted, a dive called the Casa Rio. A half-open door revealed a rear room where Negroes were laughing over their rum at a little bar. At a nod from Zandor Tar Barrel walked in.

Zandor turned in at the next door, entering a dark-ceiled room with a long bar to his right and tables beyond it. The rough talk ceased for a moment as Zandor walked in and headed for a corner table near the rear door. He dropped into a chair; an evil-looking bartender came to take his order for hot rum; and the jumble

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of conversation again awoke among the louts at the bar.

"And sure they'll be convicted." A rough-boot Irish rake dragged his mug hard along the bar. "The Whitehalls are Virginians, father, mother, son and daughter. And they call them spies? Hell, they'd trump up anything here to get honest people's money! I saw them pass this morning. In chains, the Whitehalls and their eight poor damned blacks."

In chains! For a moment Zandor envisioned a chain around one white neck, and the thought made his drink taste bitter. Damn them, the Spanish had the Whitehalls where they wanted them. Papers and maps had been found in their luggage. All possible care had been taken in the preparation of the case against them.

"THE Whitehalls were convicted! They were fined twenty-five thousand dollars each. Their eight blacks were ordered confiscated and sold in Cuba! They're taking them aboard one of the men-of-war in the river!"

When that news was brought into the barroom, there was a moment of silence, then men were banging their cups and mugs on the bar. Yarbel Zandor had only a moment to consider what his next move would be, for now four Spanish officers came swaggering into the tavern, and Zandor recognized one of them. It was Captain Carlos.

The officers were heading for a back room, and Zandor made himself as inconspicuous as he could, hoping that Carlos would pass him by. The Spaniard almost did; he strode past the table with a casual glance at Zandor, reached the door at the rear, and then swung around abruptly. He snapped a few words at his companions and they turned with him.

"I never forget a face!" Carlos had stopped at Zandor's table, left hand on the hilt of his sword. "It seems, my friend, that we have met before. Your fine recovery amazes me. This morning you were as spotted as a leopard and standing behind a table in the cabin of the big merchantman in the river!"

"If it's a riddle you're trying to weave," Zandor laughed, "then I am a poor hand at such things. I know of no ship, having only arrived this morning by coach—"

"You are a damned liar!" roared the Spaniard. "In His Majesty's name, you are under arrest. Lay aside your pistols and your belt. Immediately, I tell you!" He drew his sword, the good steel ringing as it left its long sheath. "Unbelt!"

"When I unbelt to a black dog like you," Zandor told him calmly, swinging to his feet, "it will be a cold day in hell!" His cutlass was in his hand.

Carlos did not hesitate. He stepped back, swung up, ready. But even as Zandor moved out to meet him, a pistol roared in the hand of an officer beyond Carlos and a ball missed Zandor's head without an inch to spare.

At the shot, Zandor swore and staggered back, blade lowering, left hand going to his chest as if the ball had struck him there. Captain Carlos howled triumphantly and plunged forward to make his kill. Up shot the wicked cutlass, whipping aside the Spaniard's slender blade. Then Yarbel Zandor lunged forward with a swift power that drove his cutlass deep into Carlos' body. With a jerk he whipped the blade free, and Carlos was down.

The officer behind Carlos had his sword out, but he did not have his courage with him. When Zandor closed in upon him, that bloody cutlass swinging up, the Spaniard turned in flight. He stumbled against his companion; they went backward together in a frenzied, staggering retreat; and one of them managed to escape through the door.

But the remaining Spaniard found his way suddenly blocked—blocked by a towering Negro who wielded an enormous curved blade. Tar Barrel had come to join his master.

The Spanish officer apparently found Zandor a less terrifying opponent than the giant black, for now he twisted around and plunged toward Zandor.

Yarbel Zandor's blade slap-tapped, parried, and went down the Spaniard's sword like a gleaming snake. There was a hiss, a sucking gasp for breath, one wild grunt, and there they stood, the Spaniard's eyes popping, Zandor's cold and mocking. His blade had slipped in, all the way through, and out the back. He placed his left hand on the man's chest, giving him a push. Down went the Spaniard on his back, the dark-red life of him gushing out.

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ALL New Orleans was rapidly becoming a bedlam when they rushed down the long steps to their boat. The one officer who had escaped was yelling down the street. Soldiers were coming, a troop of cavalry with heavy equipment rattling, hoofs splashing through the mudholes.

The main thing now was the fog. Tar Barrel sent the boat flying to the first cloud fifty yards away. As the boat cleaved into it, muskets opened fire from the west side of the Casa Rio. The water leaped and splashed in tiny geysers around the boat; but Tar Barrel's great strength carried it swiftly into the heavier gloom.

A moment later they struck a wide break in the fog. The *Santa Anna* lay with her nose upriver to their right; the *Juan de Fuca* loomed to their left. Two longboats lay against the starboard of the *Santa Anna* with a gangway swung overside and prisoners going aboard.

Yarbel Zandor's eyes grew hard. Among those prisoners were the Whitehalls—whose plight had brought him on this perilous venture. And it was ironic enough that a Zandor should attempt a service for the Whitehalls. For generations the Whitehalls of Bountiful Acres had arrogantly and pointedly ignored their neighbors in Zandor Dell. No Zandor had ever been invited inside the magnificent Whitehall home; and certainly no Zandor could be considered by Martha Whitehall as a proper mate for her daughter.

One Whitehall had had the courage to defy that arrogant prejudice; and Yarbel Zandor was thinking of her now—the slim, lovely girl he had held in his arms. But Anne Whitehall's defiance had been useless; indeed, it had resulted in disaster for him. Challenged by two young Virginia dandies, Zandor had met them both on the same morning, leaving one with a pistol ball in his brain and the other sprawled on the grass, lifeless from a sword wound. Immediately the Whitehalls had exerted their powerful political influence to have Yarbel Zandor outlawed. And little wonder, for one of those rash young gentlemen whom Zandor had dueled had been Martha Whitehall's choice as Anne's husband.

"Halt that boat there!" The voice, rolling from the *Juan de Fuca,* called Zandor back to the present and its danger. "Turn this way," the voice ordered.

Tar Barrel did not need an order to bend more urgently to the oars; but they did not wait long aboard the *Juan de Fuca.* Zandor's boat being out of musket range, the *Juan de Fuca* opened fire with a small cannon on the starboard bow. The ball came upstream, and missed the boat by a yard. Then a larboard gun aboard the *Santa Anna* let go at them before they reached the next hanging cloud of fog. It was a worse shot than the *Juan de Fuca's.*

"Purely a waste of good ammunition, Tar Barrel!" cried Zandor as the fog once more purled around them.

"But look alive, black man!" Zandor pointed to the right as they once more cleared the fog and a real breeze now filled their skimpy strip of sail. "We are not done with them!"

It was a longboat from one of the men-of-war, a dozen well armed sailors filling it, their oars flashing. A young officer stood in the bow, arms folded.

The *Gallant Rover* was not far away by this time, and fierce activity had already sprung to life aboard. As the longboat swept forward, bearing rapidly down on the smaller craft, some of the men answered a sharp command from the young officer by dropping their oars and reaching quickly for their muskets.

It was then that the *Gallant Rover* went into action. A ballooning puff of smoke broke from her tall bow, and the roar of one of her forward guns came rolling over the river. There was a crash as a cannon ball struck the Spanish boat; wounded, screaming men were flung into the sea; and a moment later the boat was nothing more than drifting wreckage.

"And that," said Yarbel Zandor, "is what *we* call shooting!"

He and Tar Barrel boarded the *Gallant Rover* a short time later. Mr. Darby was already getting up sail. Men were manning the lines, climbing into the rigging.

"Haul that down!" Zandor pointed to the British colors. "Get up the old rag they'll better understand!"

The British flag came down. Big and bold, a black flag went up. The wind caught it, standing it out like a board, displaying the white skull and crossbones.

"Gunners to their stations." Zandor was giving orders quietly. "Get a couple of barrels of alcohol ready. Johnson,

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Smith, see to the torches. Grappling hooks and boarders ready, Swenson."

Axes were biting through seven-inch anchor lines a few moments later. The *Gallant Rover* shook. Sails snapped like guns, bellied. The *Gallant Rover* moved.

"Stand by to board!" called out Zandor.

THE *Gallant Rover* bore straight down on her victim. Cries and yells were lifting aboard the Spaniard, orders hurling back and forth.

Iron vessels to come later would have made a mess of it. Stout wood and powerful timber might groan and bend, but it would snap back. Before the *Santa Anna* could get her guns ready for a broadside the *Gallant Rover* was smashing alongside. Grappling hooks were flying over her rails, and Zandor's wild fighting men were leaping into her larboard runway and flooding her decks with pistols blazing, blades slashing. A terrific volley of musket fire crashed down from the *Gallant Rover's* rigging.

The Spaniard never had a chance. On the deck aft of the captain's cabin Yarbel Zandor met her master. He was a big fellow with a patch over his right eye, no mean swordsman. Zandor got a nick on the shoulder before his blade weaved through, a terrible stroke that dropped the Spaniard on his face.

Tar Barrel and another gang of hellions had struck straight for the forecastle. Others swarmed everywhere. The Spanish were trying to make a fight of it; many stuck to their posts in the face of certain death. When Tar Barrel reappeared he had the eight wild-eyed Whitehall servants in tow and was rushing them aboard the *Gallant Rover*. The poor blacks still wore their long chain, a turn of it wrapped around each neck and locked in place.

Zandor found the Whitehalls in the captain's cabin. They were backed against the forward bulkhead, their eyes wide.

His glance went first to Anne Whitehall, and he saw the warmth come into her deep brown eyes. She made a little, eager gesture with her hands. She was as he had remembered her these four long years; and the others, too, were unchanged, though sadly tattered—young Gilbert, the prettified dandy; Roger Whitehall, long, lean and grave; Martha Whitehall, still haughty and disapproving, in spite of the Spanish chain around her neck. At his order they followed Zandor to the deck.

Men with axes had already chopped through the *Santa Anna's* mooring lines. The *Gallant Rover* had her now, her cloud of sail filled and straining with wind. With the *Santa Anna* on her larboard the shore batteries could not open fire without sending balls crashing into the Spanish hull. Hugging the vessel to her, the *Gallant Rover* was dragging her away as the Whitehalls hurried over the rails.

The *Juan de Fuca* had cast off her lines and was trying to saw herself out of the way under hastily run-up headsails. She had been caught by surprise like the *Santa Anna* and was having a time of it.

With Spaniards driven belowdecks, stout bullies were swinging two ponderous barrels of straight grain alcohol aboard the doomed ship. The torches were ready, the men gleefully waiting to play their final part in the game. But Zandor was holding back, while his men sent one barrel rolling and smashing down a companionway. A hatch cover was ripped off in the waist of the ship and the second barrel sent plummeting down toward the powder magazines.

"Starboard guns!" The order to attack the *Juan de Fuca* was coming now. "Open fire!"

"Starboard guns!" The order was repeated in a yell. "Open fire!"

Twenty-two guns rolled their thundering report across the river. The *Gallant Rover* lifted and shook from end to end as if struck by a mighty fist. Her larboard rail ground down against the *Santa Anna's* rail, the strong wood breaking and snapping here and there, some of the grappling hooks tearing free.

They were getting clear of the shore batteries. A hail of shot poured into the *Juan de Fuca*. The ship was already a stricken thing. Holes yawned in her side; masts and booms were coming down, the wreckage pouring overside. Another terrific blast seemed to break her in half. She settled, rolled, then came roaring up in the middle, the waist flying out of her.

"Fire the *Santa Anna!*"

Torches were flung. The hot fire—almost colorless at first—came up in great puffs. The last of the grappling hooks

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were knocked free. The *Gallant Rover* answered her rudder, heeling over, her stern giving the blazing *Santa Anna* a wild nudge as the two ships parted.

THE *Santa Anna* blew up when they had cleared her with four hundred yards of open water between them. Three more explosions had taken place aboard the *Juan de Fuca,* completing the wreck of her and sprawling her out on the water. The *Santa Anna* went up with one roar, a blast that shook the river, and she sank swiftly.

The *Gallant Rover* was already swinging out of range of the shore batteries. One shot ripped up a few splinters on deck; another tore off a hatch cover; but the rest of the fire fell far short of the ship. Now New Orleans was falling astern as they crowded more sail on the *Gallant Rover.*

Captain Zandor turned back into his cabin. Old Weens, the steward, had been busy with a file, and the Whitehalls were free of their chains. Somebody had mixed Anne's brother, Gilbert, a stout drink of hot rum.

"Well, we're off for Virginia." Zandor tossed his sheathed cutlass on the table. "I know a quiet little bay where you can all go ashore. The tale of this affair is not liable to reach Cuba or Santo Domingo for three or four weeks."

"Neat work, Zandor." Gilbert Whitehall's upper lip curled. "Butcher's work, of course; but then, your family has always shown talent in that line. By the way, I noticed the colors you are flying. I always wondered how the Zandors managed to come by their money."

"Don't pick yourself a fight with me, Gil." Zandor laughed. "I know you hate the Zandors in and out. We generally furnish the first corpse for the Whitehalls to start their graveyards."

"Gilbert!" Anne Whitehall was on her feet, her eyes bright with anger. "We owe a great debt to Yarbel Zandor." She turned. Then, to Zandor: "I—I am a Whitehall who won't forget!"

"Anne!" Martha Whitehall's voice was sharp. "We owe nothing to this Zandor for his dramatics, his blood-letting, his murderous attack—"

"It is our misfortune," said Roger Whitehall coldly, "that a Whitehall should be plucked from a difficult situation by a bloody Zandor!"

"If you were just a little younger," Zandor told him with a thin smile, "I'd drag you out on deck and make you fight, Whitehall. You Whitehalls have little right to scorn me for that black flag I fly. It was piracy that gave you your wealth—"

"You're a lying dog!" Gilbert Whitehall had seized a pistol from the top of a locker behind him. "I'll blow the heart out of—"

Anne Whitehall was just in time. She struck his arm, knocking the gun up. Martha Whitehall screamed as the pistol roared, its bullet smashing through the cabin roof. Anne stepped between her brother and Zandor, and with a fierce shove she sent Gilbert Whitehall backward into a chair. Then she faced Zandor, her slim body taut and the color high in her lovely face.

"What you say is true! My grandfather and my greatgrandfather were pirates, and everything that we possess is stained with pirate blood. I know that for the truth, and it will be told." She swung around on her father before he could speak. "I'll shout it to the world unless you undo your ugly work and have Yarbel Zandor pardoned the moment we step ashore. You gave me Zandor Dell as my dowry—the honey to catch my fine bee! You took that land from Yarbel Zandor; you had him outlawed." Her voice dropped, almost to a whisper. "Father, I swear to you that unless you undo that trickery, I'll tell the true story of the Whitehalls and then go crawling on my knees to beg for Yarbel Zandor's pardon."

When she finished there was no sound in that small cabin. She had turned away from her family, and now she was coming toward Zandor, and he saw that there were tears in her eyes. "Yarbel." She spoke his name almost timidly. "I took Zandor Dell to—to keep it. To keep it until you came back."

"It's yours for good, Anne," Zandor said, as he drew her to him, "—yours and mine."

The Whitehalls could find nothing whatever to say.

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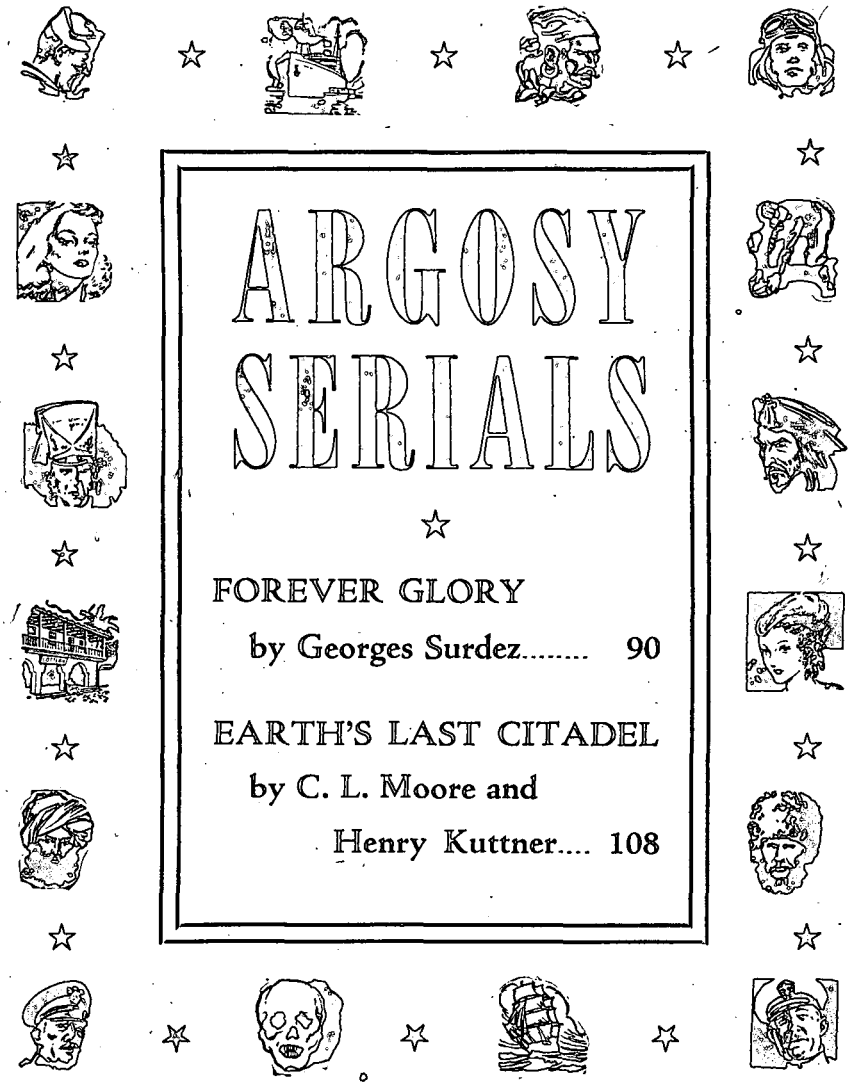

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FOREVER GLORY

By
GEORGES
SURDEZ

Illustrated by
Hamilton Greene

Second Installment of a Four-Part Serial

SYNOPSIS

YOUNG, eager to serve France, Charles Lespard gains his first battle experience and his first share of glory in 1918 when he protects a wounded Legionnaire named François-Aristide Castaing. That exploit wins Lespard a decoration and also the close friendship of Castaing, a seasoned Legionnaire. Through Castaing's efforts Lespard is transferred to the Legion, and the two serve with distinction in the war.

While Lespard is fond of Castaing and tremendously admires his ability as a soldier, he cannot agree with the big man's cynical philosophy. Castaing is determined to reach the top by any methods—

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to die in bed a marshal of France. Lespard is a soldier-idealist who has dedicated his life to the service of France.

After the Armistice Castaing makes an effort to get into business, for he wants the power of money; but his plan falls through and he returns to the Legion. As for Lespard, he refuses an opportunity at a safe and comfortable position in the peactime army. So the two are sent to Morocco to fight in the obscure and savage battles with the tribesmen.

When they meet in Casablanca in 1925, they have both won plenty of medals and little in the way of promotion. Castaing is bitter about it; he says he is going to get on the political band-wagon just as soon as he has received his captaincy. Here in Morocco, he claims, the native leader Abd-el-Krim is rapidly increasing in military power, and a showdown is due soon. That showdown will be disastrous because the French politicians are deliberately helping to create the emer-

They reached the rifle-pits along the crest. . . .

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gency in order to force the aged Marshal Lyautey out of power.

Castaing mocks Lespard when the younger man reveals that he is going on a special mission with Captain Denoyel of Native Intelligence. Both men have great respect for Denoyel, who is in many ways the perfect Legion officer; but Castaing says that working with him means no recognition and probably death at the hands of the tribesmen.

A few days later, however, Lespard sets out with Denoyel and a small detachment of Moorish cavalry. According to Denoyel, they are engaged in a delicate and dangerous mission; they are going, virtually unarmed, to the headquarters of a leader of the Beni-Zerouals.

The danger is soon evident. As they ride into the hills, a rifle cracks, and one of the Moors falls. Lespard orders the men to dismount and take cover, knowing that the responsibility for the coming battle is his. Denoyel is playing the role of diplomat, and everything now is up to Lespard.

CHAPTER SIX

The Flaming Hills

THE detonations multiplied, echoed from all directions in the ravine. Within a few seconds, catching sight of a short flash here and there, Lespard located the snipers. They were not numerous and occupied a low ridge to the northeast.

As always with well-trained soldiers, the nervousness vanished before actual danger. Two of the riders had collected the horses, were leading them to shelter. The mount of the man detached on point duty came galloping back and joined its companions. One of the animals was bleeding from a long surface crease on the hind quarters. The man who had been hit remained motionless, a bundle of white and blue clothing from which protruded short boots of shining, soft, scarlet leather.

The lieutenant sought for a good target. He had brought along his hunting rifle, a precision weapon manufactured in Austria, better for game than the ordinary issue Lebel *mousqueton*. The range was in his favor, six hundred meters, somewhat long for the average native marksman. The ambush had been revealed two minutes too soon to succeed.

"How many do you count, Kazim?" he called.

"More than ten, Lieutenant; less than one score."

"Use your back-sights," Lespard ordered, gave instructions.

His adversaries' bullets whipped and whined. There were four or five repeaters, from the high-pitched tones, doubtless Mausers taken from the Spaniards. The others were single-shot rifles of heavy caliber; the missiles seemed to snort and snore.

For perhaps fifteen minutes, Lespard was occupied, shooting at dodging silhouettes, forcing a sniper from behind rocky cover with ricochets. The attackers seemed puzzled, irresolute. They knew the ambush had failed, but were not eager to advance in the open and try an open fight at almost even odds.

Looking for Captain Denoyel, Lespard was startled to see him seated on a boulder, in full view, draped in his red cloak, smoking a cigarette. His first instinct was to shout at him to take cover, then he decided against it. If any man knew what he was doing, at any time and all times, that man was Denoyel.

From across the ravine, the ambushers continued to shoot. And that blotch of red naturally attracted lead. Before long, Lespard had identified the leader, a chap who wore a conspicuous *jellaba*, a sort of cassock, striped brown and white. He was exposing himself frequently, evidently sought to get his followers to close in. With small success, for the carbines of the escort riders soon drove them from sight.

Lespard missed the fellow repeatedly, but he knew his bullets hit near the mark, as the tribesman soon grew more cautious, shortened his runs from place to place.

"Got him," Lespard muttered at last.

The native had faltered, stumbled, slid headlong. Lespard had seen too many men hit not to know, even at that distance, a hit from a simulated fall. To make sure, he operated the bolt rapidly, pressed the trigger for the next shot. The chamber was empty. And while he replaced the magazine, the man rose, lurched to cover.

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A scattering of shots, then silence settled down.

"THEY'VE gone," Kazim announced ten minutes later, standing in the open. The others followed his example slowly. The emergency was over, the enemy had left. In the distance, the point-man signaled all clear, lifting his carbine above his head.

Their first concern was for the fallen man. He was dead, a neat round puncture above the left eye, and a ghastly exit hole at the back of his skull. His comrades wrapped the head in his turban, stripped him of outer clothing, equipment, weapons. Strapped in a blanket, he was lifted and put across his horse. Captain Denoyel had touched his chest.

"Forgive me, brother," he said in dialect. "The bullet was meant for me. Allah's will alone decided."

They rode to the position occupied by the attackers. A quick search revealed three bodies, completely stripped by the escaping survivors, save for the loin-rag. One was a grown man, barrel-chested and bearded, another a youth, the third not much more than a boy. Fighters develop early in Morocco. There were blood spots elsewhere, but the wounded had been carried away. Sergeant Kazim trailed the stains to a sheltered spot where the horses had been concealed, and scanned the ground for a few moments.

"There were fifteen," he interpreted. "Of the twelve who left, four had wounds. Only one serious enough to be carried. Do I see right, Captain?"

"No man reads tracks better than you, Kazim." Denoyel smiled. "In such matters, I believe your words before my own eyes."

They rode on, emerged into a plain, where ambush was no longer easy. Denoyel brought his horse up beside Lespard.

"You understood what I was doing. I am reputed to have divine protection, the *baraka,* and I gambled on my luck. One has to become a bit of a mountebank, dealing with these people. Not more than in other places, I know, but in a different style."

"I thought something of the sort, Captain."

Captain Denoyel

"That is why I asked for you. In a thing of this sort, it is awkward to give advance instructions, yet another chap might have protested aloud, or what would have been worse, come to stand beside me, doubling the target. As it is, I did not hide, I did not fire a shot, and I am alive. Not only our men but the other fellows will spread that in the hills." Denoyel laughed shortly. "That stunt is very effective until, some fine-day, a bullet spills your brains out."

"Even then," Lespard pointed out, "they don't say: 'He never had the *baraka*', but rather: 'Allah withdrew His hand this time.' It was not a random attack? They knew who you were?"

"Of course. Our departure was reported to Abd-el-Krim, or more likely to his brother, Si-Mohammed, who handles the diplomatic end. He notified my opposite number in this zone, an old acquaintance

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of mine, whom you shall probably meet before very long, Moussa el Daburki, who prepared this delicate reception."

"You know him, Captain?"

"Quite well. Ugly-looking chap, but quite intelligent and brave. Self-made. He was a drummer in a Spanish Native Regiment for several years, went over to the rebels after their success at Anoual. A good field officer, and a clever spy."

BEFORE sunset, the party trotted into a large village on the slope of a hill, low mud houses. Half-naked children, a crowd of men and women, gathered to watch them. They entered a vast yard enclosed by squat buildings—Si-Ahmed's residence. The old man came to greet them, a short, dignified gentleman, whose white beard and gold-rimmed glasses contrasted with the weapons at his belt. The captain dismounted, the two embraced affectionately. Lespard saluted, shook hands. Then he left them to inspect the installation of his men near the stables.

"Smells bad," Kazim informed him, laconically.

"Why, what's wrong?"

"Everything, Lieutenant. I've been here before, many know me. Yet there was no friendly greeting. No question as to our dead man. Listen to me, Lieutenant; this land is about to sprout blades."

Nevertheless, the *imam* conducted the rites at the burial in the local cemetery. Si-Ahmed was a good host, very friendly. Yet Lespard found an atmosphere of constraint at the evening meal. This was served in a large room, gathered more than twenty guests. According to native standards, the food was delicate, choice. Roast mutton, chicken, stews. Lespard had eaten with natives often, did not feel at all ill at ease squatted on the floor, eating with his right hand.

But he envied Denoyel's composure. For among the guests was Moussa el Daburki, envoy of the Riffi, a rather stout chap with a swarthy face fringed with black beard, pockmarks thick on his skin. A white cloth was wound about his temples, leaving the top of his shaven skull nude. Little dark eyes gleamed under thick lids.

Lespard did not like Moussa, and Moussa did not like Lespard. When their glances met, they smiled politely, showing their teeth. When the fellow bent to eat, the Frenchman saw another garment under the snowy *jellaba,* a cloth striped brown and white. And he was sure that the sinewy fingers now dipping into the dish had curled around the trigger of a gun aimed at him, not so long ago.

Moussa obviously lacked appetite tonight. Someone explained that he was feverish. That afternoon, while hunting, he had slipped. And he had sprained his knee enough to limp. Lespard grinned, and had his own idea of the accident. Denoyel also, who related dramatically how he and his party had been attacked by bandits.

"I have seen you somewhere, Lieutenant Lespard," Moussa said, in very fair French. "You have not been in the Riff? Then in Tangiers? I shall not forget you, from now on."

"A man never forgets friend or foe, Moussa el Daburki."

So, he thought, Moussa knew that he knew. And he had declared his intention of seeking vengeance as openly as decorum permitted. When they rose, Moussa sank back, settled on his haunches, then slid forward on the cushions. He had fainted. Blood stained his clothing. Two servants were called to carry him to his room, and Denoyel, who was somewhat of a surgeon, like most men of his profession, took his kit and nodded for Lespard to follow. They found the wounded man still unconscious, two of his companions trying to bring him to.

"Stand aside," Denoyel asked softly.

He had washed his hands in disinfected water, opened the kit. He bared the man's legs almost to the groin, looked up at Lespard and nodded: Bullet. The thigh was swollen, livid, the tumefaction reaching the knee. For fifteen seconds, the captain probed deftly, then held up a small bit of metal with the forceps.

"He must be made of steel to have walked about with that."

HE CLEANED the wound carefully. Lespard helped him apply the dressing. It was not the first time that the young officer had seen a wound he had inflicted, but, where he had always felt

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pity and vague remorse, he now felt satisfaction. The man was not an enemy, he was an assassin. He saw the man's glance filter under his lids, and spoke one word to his chief:

"Conscious."

"It is not a sprain, but a bullet," Denoyel explained to Moussa. "You were foolish to walk about thus. The leg might have been lost."

"Tell no one outside," Moussa asked him. "Men would laugh. I tripped and fell; my gun was discharged by accident. No man likes to be such a fool as to cripple himself with his own weapon."

"I shall tell no one," Denoyel assured him, gravely. Everyone present knew the circumstances perfectly well, but it was not decent to mention them under a neutral room. "What game were you hunting, Moussa el Daburki?"

"A buck, a large buck." Moussa sat up, smoked a cigarette given him by a companion. "I had a bead on him when I slipped. I shall find him again."

"You have revenge to get?" Denoyel smiled.

"The buck was not at fault, really," Moussa explained. "But Allah has so created man that man must hunt. And a man starting out with one purpose must keep after it until his breath is gone."

"That is true." Denoyel smiled again. "It was indeed a queer accident. The rifle went off very near, yet burnt no garment, no skin." He dropped the cleaned slug into Moussa's hand. "For remembrance. Shake this powder in a cup of water, drink, and you will sleep peacefully."

The two Frenchmen crossed the yard to their quarters.

"Do the others all know?" Lespard asked.

"They have guessed. Our dead, Moussa wounded. Cigarette?" Lespard heard his chief chuckle. "I bet he threw the stuff away, thinking I might poison him. But do you know that chap has splendid grit? He walked about, sat through the meal, bleeding and suffering, trying to cover the fact that he had led the ambush in person. He is proud and he plays a hard game—"

"Up to and including murder," Lespard put in impatiently.

"Allowed in the local code," Denoyel insisted. "I like him, he is a patriot according to his lights. As my own code balks at murder, he has an advantage. If matters shape up as I much fear they will, he will kill me."

"You can take care of yourself, Captain."

"As a rule, quite so. But conditions are far from normal here. Si-Ahmed confirms to me that the Beni-Zerouals have decided to resist Abd-el-Krim when he attacks. That resistance cannot last long, for the Riffi have massed forty thousand men in readiness, five thousand of them regulars, trained and armed in modern fashion. After that, to avoid massacre, the Beni-Zerouals will perforce join the rebels against us. Si-Ahmed will be in danger for having advised fighting Abd-el-Krim. I'll confer with him again tonight, privately, and prepare a detailed report for you to take away."

Lespard was startled. "And what about you, Captain?"

"I'm staying, of course." Denoyel puffed thoughtfully, added: "I made the man definite promises. The Government has not seen fit to keep them. That leaves me no alternative. It is essential that I stay with him."

"You'll be killed!"

"Very likely." The captain continued in the same even voice: "You see now why I had to have someone who would obey without protest. You understand my duty and yours."

It was against Lespard's instinct, against his soldier's pride and loyalty to leave a comrade in danger. But logic was on Denoyel's side. If he left and abandoned Si-Ahmed to face the consequences of siding with France, he would lower not only his own prestige but that of all French officers in his service. Lespard could understand that clearly: Denoyel was carrying out his duty to France.

So argument was useless. And Lespard could not voice his admiration for Denoyel's conduct; words were silly in this case.

IT WAS late in the night when Lespard was awakened by a hand on his shoulder. And he was startled that he had fallen asleep at all.

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"Charles," his chief said. In long years of acquaintance and friendship, it was the first time his given name had been used by the captain. "You'll have to leave in an hour. Si-Ahmed has just received word that the Riffi are moving into this region. Leave quietly, at an ordinary trot, in the direction we came. As soon as you're out of sight, swerve and head with all possible speed for our outpost at Tafrant. Have them inform headquarters that all the blockhouses will be attacked tomorrow, but that the real offensive will drive in the direction of Ourtzagh."

Lespard pulled on his boots, went to seek for Kazim, found him waiting outside his door. "Lot of people moving in and out of this place, Lieutenant. I was coming to warn you. The men are standing by their horses."

"Good work. You're a smart fellow, Kazim."

He went back in the room and sat down beside Denoyel. There was danger in lighting a lamp—the glow might attract attention. He could discern Denoyel's silhouette; part of his face was lighted when he sucked the cigarette. Lespard found his heart wrenched at the thought that his friend was doomed.

"Doesn't matter," Denoyel said as if he had heard Lespard's thoughts. "It's much easier to face than one might imagine. To start with, hope won't die that someway one will escape."

Lespard never could recall quite how, but he mentioned a topic that had rested heavily on his mind since his conversation with the skeptical Castaing.

"I seldom concern myself with French politics at home," Denoyel replied. "I think native politics are cleaner, more wholesome, partly waged with knife and gun." And although Lespard had mentioned no name, he added, "Our friend is a hero and a fool both. A fool, for a man with a soldier's instincts never goes far in politics save as the tool of another. What is even worse is a professional politician undertaking to command armies and fleets. Separate arts, you see. Are the rumors you hear true? At least in part."

He spoke in a very low voice, out of the darkness. Lespard had an eerie feeling that he already spoke from the grave.

Yes, he agreed, Marshal Lyautey's removal probably would please many people in the Government. To start with, he had enemies in the Chambers. Lyautey had been called by Premier Briand during the World War, to become Minister of War. Lyautey had resigned very soon, because he would not tolerate civilian, political meddling. He had stated openly, before senators and deputies, that nothing mentioned in the Chambers remained secret to the enemy.

Politicians also considered that Morocco was run too much like a private estate of the army. They wanted a civilian resident. Marshal Petain, much more pliable than Lyautey, his equal in prestige, would probably be called in to face the military emergency.

FOREIGN intrigues? Yes, Denoyel knew much about them. He knew, for instance, that Etchevarieta, in the name of Spain, had offered to back Abd-el-Krim for sultan of the whole of Morocco if he attacked France. He had guaranteed him twenty million *pesetas,* heavy artillery, even planes. But the native's demands had been too heavy for Spain to stomach. The war had continued.

The Germans, who had made a strong bid to control the Riff's resources before the war, through the Mannersmann firm, had never given up hope. Malmussi, Italian agent at Tangiers, had flattered Abd-el-Krim, assured him of sympathy and secret support.

"And there is the Communist agitation. Abd-el-Krim's brother was in Paris not so long ago, conferred with the Communist deputy, Berton." Denoyel struck a match. Lespard saw his smile. "Perhaps they discussed North African folklore. However, the Communist publication, *L'Humanité,* is publishing articles openly advising young soldiers to refuse African service.

"Last year, I was authorized to promise the Beni-Zerouals, a sort of buffer tribe between us and the Riff, modern rifles and equipment, the support of twenty battalions. When the time came, Marshal Lyautey could not obtain, for the whole of Morocco, much more than half of that figure. Why not? We have almost a half million soldiers in France. But the politi-

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"The Legion sticks." That was the motto.

cos claim they fear trouble if they order home regiments to Africa. It would be simple to ask for fifty thousand volunteers. No one wants that easy solution in Paris. Why?

"I came here to explain to Si-Ahmed why France had compromised by building scattered blockhouses in this zone, occupied by a few hundred men, instead of sending what was promised. It is obvious that we could not act otherwise if we wished to lure Abd-el-Krim into fighting. All these miserable details turn out to be important for me, as they'll cost me my head."

"Yet you found the courage to serve on, knowing all that."

"Why not? I'm a Frenchman and an officer, and a man must walk the path on which fate places his feet, according to his character, his means, his honesty. I serve France. France is greater than any party, great despite unworthy Frenchmen. France is two thousand years of history, forty million honest people."

"But the dishonest bring misfortune."

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"Yet the honest work of honest men serves. No matter what happens, never despair of France. Scum films the top, but the nation is sound." Denoyel slapped his knee and laughed. "You'll have me talking philosophy and religion, if we keep on. Hark, the cock crows—to horse, to horse—"

They walked into the yard in the mist of morning. The crests of the Riff showed grayish against the pale sky. The riders of the escort knew that Denoyel was staying, knew why. This was evident, as they came one by one to clasp his hand. He called each one by name, embraced Kazim, who was almost weeping. They did not protest, although they would have died for him. He was the chief, his decision was beyond question.

He strode beside Lespard's horse to the edge of the village. Then their hands locked.

"Take care of my report, Charles," he said.

"Yes." Lespard swallowed to control his voice. "Farewell, Captain."

He urged his horse into a trot, turned in the saddle after covering some hundred yards. Denoyel was standing there, watching him, a long, picturesque figure in the scarlet cloak. The new sun kindled gleams in the braid around his kepi—badge of glory, badge of servitude, badge of sacrifice.

"Come on," Lespard called, "fast trot."

At his side rode Kazim, with a peculiar, moist sheen on his brown cheeks. And the morning wind, already warmed by spring, was damp on his own face. Then he started. Very far away, so remote that it was only a trembling of the air, rifle fire had started. The Riffi were attacking.

CHAPTER SEVEN

War Within War

WEEKS passed, the formidable epic of the Riff Campaign unrolled. A few battalions of Legionnaires and Native Infantry were thrown into the path of the avalanche. From the first, the conflict resembled national war more than a colonial operation. The Riffi were armed with repeating rifles, Mausers captured from Spain during victorious campaigns, guns smuggled in by non-belligerents. They had machine guns, sub-machine guns, grenades, and even field artillery, seventy-five millimeter cannon taken from Spain.

The warriors themselves were hardy, tough fighters, organized, intelligently led. The tribal contingents were bolstered by squads of regulars, many of whom were veterans of Verdun and the Somme, natives of the Riff who had served with the French Army's famous Moroccan Division. Among their battalion and company commanders were deserters from the Foreign Legion, such as Klem, from the African Light Infantry, such as Garru. And this so-called barbaric army had excellent liaison; trailed telephone wire behind its van.

Lespard was given command of a company in a newly formed Field Battalion of Legion; Castaing led another. Both were officially promoted to captains many weeks after they had assumed the duties. For months, as spring melted into summer, Lespard and his battalion were shuttled, in trucks or afoot, from one critical spot to another of the long front, to plug a hole here, to punch a hole there, beating off attacks with machine guns and grenades, clearing some crest at the point of the bayonet.

A bullet seared Lespard's left hand, another took some flesh from his ribs, yet he refused to go to hospital: Officers were being picked off so rapidly by snipers that minor injuries did not matter. He and his men went without sleep, often without food, at times without water. The uniforms became rags, wire replacing buttons, native sandals replaced issue boots. After each engagement, some Legionnaires would be left behind in shallow graves, others evacuated for wounds or illness. The training depots sent in new drafts; men would join a company one evening, be killed the next day, and no one could remember their faces, their names.

"The Legion sticks."

That was the motto, and the Legion held, in fact. Lespard had learned that Captain Denoyel had been killed, along with Si-Ahmed, on the day when the Beni-Zerouals, after a gallant and vain

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resistance, had accepted Abd-el-Krim's cause as their own. He knew that Denoyel's head had been exposed in the hill villages, that Moussa el Daburki had collected the price of murder.

But Denoyel was only one among hundreds of dead. Whatever the shortcomings of French officers of that period as a class, many individuals proved themselves Frenchmen following the best traditions. A twenty-year-old sub-lieutenant, Pol Lapeyre, held the blockhouse at Beni-Derkoul with a handful of negro privates until the attackers actually spilled into the place, then blew up himself, his men and many of the Riffs. At the post of Aoudour, another young lieutenant, Franchi, held on for fifty-two days, one against dozens, evacuated upon order, bringing back his wounded.

Castaing, for all his ambition and skepticism, fought like a paladin. His massive silhouette ascended slopes beaten by the rapid fire of the enemy. He showed the younger Legionnaires how a veteran of the World War could toss grenades. His uniform in shreds, his lost kepi replaced by a dingy turban, he loomed in the most dangerous spots, a cigar clamped between his teeth.

"Our Old Man's got guts," his Legionnaires said.

LATE in the summer, the Field Battalion settled down for a night's rest along a crest north of Kifrane. The men had that day covered forty kilometers on trucks, had marched fifteen more, had attacked four times to relieve an outpost, then had dug shallow trenches to defend their conquered position. Castaing's company mustered seventy men, Lespard's eighty-odd, but on paper a company is a company, and they carried out assignments intended for full-strength units. But all felt that the situation was better, that Abd-el-Krim would fail to take either Fez or Taza.

"We'll soon see developments from Paris," Castaing remarked. He and Lespard were inspecting the trenches together. The men off duty slept on the ground, rifles fastened to their wrists by straps. Yet, rounding a corner into a wider bay, the two officers were surprised to hear laughter. The corporal in charge explained. "One of them out here talks French pretty well. He's a great kidder—"

It was a practice of the Riffs to send out propagandists to make speeches between the lines, and in most cases these agents were abusive and clumsy. This chap, probably an ex-Legionnaire, had the ironical approach.

"You wonderful Legionnaires!" he shouted. "Kings of suckers—essence of fools, you are admirable. Come on, fight us, get your mugs smashed for a few pennies and a bronze cross. Fight to enrich the bankers and the traders, to give diamonds to their janes, to fatten their flabby stomachs.

"Don't come to us. You don't want to win five *pesetas* a day without risk, as armorer or workman behind our lines, feeding and drinking on officers' stocks we've captured! You don't want four girls each to do your cooking and mending—"

"Put it in writing!" a Legionnaire called back.

"Can your girls play the piano?" another put in.

Lespard borrowed a carbine from one of the guards and hoisted himself on the parapet. His eyes were accustomed to the darkness. He looked toward the renegade's voice, discerned something moving, and pressed the trigger. There was a scramble, the clatter of rolling stones, and the man's tones, in indignant fury: "Why, you dirty swine, you almost got me!"

"Go away and shut up, pal! If I'd been mean, I'd have used a grenade." Lespard slid back into the trench and handed the gun back.

From outside, a hundred feet or so, a new voice rose.

"I know your talk, Captain Lespard! Are you listening to me? This is Moussa el Daburki. I killed your friend, the tall captain. I broke his jaw with a pistol shot, and let the newly widowed women of a village finish him off. Then I cut off his head with my knife. Come out here, and I'll cut yours. You don't dare come? I'll wait, and sooner or later I'll cut yours off!"

Lespard opened his mouth to reply, but Castaing's fingers closed on his arm warningly. They walked some distance in

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silence, then the big man talked in a low voice: "If he knows you're a captain, he knows your unit number. We're always after the men not to reveal any information." He shook Lespard's shoulder gently. "I know how you feel about Denoyel. Yes, of all of us, he was the cleanest and bravest. Say nothing, wait, and sooner or later, you'll run across Moussa. Then act, don't argue. Meanwhile, let's have a drink."

A SUTLER had erected a canvas shack to serve as a canteen. Seats and tables were knocked together of boards and packing cases. A dozen officers were there, in the weak light of a screened lantern, drinking from tin mugs. Bearded and sunburnt, in rags, they resembled a band of Calabrese brigands. One of them had a Paris newspaper of recent date, obtained from a supply-service chauffeur. He handed it to Castaing, indicating a paragraph. Castaing read and passed it on to Lespard.

Monsieur Painlevé, Prime Minister, has issued the following order, according to recent information: "Marshal Petain shall take up, at a date set by himself, the general direction of the troops and military services in Morocco. Marshal Lyautey will place at his disposal all the personnel and material which Marshal Petain may ask of him to accomplish his mission."

"Petain'll bring his own crowd," a young lieutenant remarked, "and they'll eat all those lovely chestnuts we've been hauling out of the hot coals!"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" an oldish major said quietly. "If we officers speak that way, can we blame our men for spreading rumors? We're not here to get rewards, but to serve."

Lespard smiled faintly. Denoyel had said something like that. Then his eyes encountered another item concerning Morocco.

The inefficiency and ignorance of the highly praised Native Intelligence Service in the Protectorate are beyond imagination. The lack of information was so absolute that an officer of great repute was caught by the surprise attack of the Riffs. His ease of mind is evidenced by the fact that he had dismissed his military escort as unnecessary, had remained for a social visit. This mistake has cost him his life, but his head became a trophy to encourage to rebellion tribes that still hesitated to join the enemy.

This was aimed at Denoyel, and a blind, choking rage gripped Lespard before such injustice. His face altered so much that Castaing noticed it and asked to see the paper. He read and shrugged.

"So what? Do you expect anything but a bray from an ass? That damn journalist's behind is beyond reach of your boot. Forget it."

"I'll look him up, I'll—"

"Steady." Castaing looked at the moralizing major and lowered his voice: "That was written by a hired man, it's propaganda to discredit the existing order here and to clear the way for loud praise of the new men. Lespard, this is the time to change trains. All aboard the Petain Express!"

WITH the appointment of Petain, reinforcements materialized with miraculous ease. Battalions came from the Rhine, from France, from Algeria, from Tunisia, infantry, machine gunners, artillery, cavalry, tanks, planes, scouting machines from the army, heavy bombers from the navy.

Marshal Lyautey resigned his civil powers. His official communication gave reasons of age, poor health, and concluded on a pathetic note, coming from the man who had conquered Morocco for France and held it for thirteen years: "I shall hold myself at the disposal of my successor to give him information *in case he should think that my experience in the country might be useful to him.*"

With the arrival of fresh troops in considerable numbers, the situation was soon well in hand, so civilian committees appeared along the lines, in quiet places. Senators and deputies arrived, accompanied by young, handsome staff-officers. They wore big boots, leather leggings and toted big sticks, were delighted to rough it. At times, they had to drink white wine with roast meat.

One such group visited Lespard's battalion. Conspicuous among the lot was Senator Croizier. He was a man of fifty-five, short and broad, with a big stomach and a neat black beard. He had held the portfolio of minister twice, but much preferred to run things from behind the

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scenes. A needy lawyer at thirty-five, he was now connected with banks, industrial firms, railroad and steamship lines. He was worth many millions, and statesmen were said to be his puppets. His full, fleshy face appeared stupid until one saw his eyes, small, piercing as awls, flashing shrewdly.

Castaing's attitude irritated Lespard on this occasion. The big chap played the rough and ready subaltern to perfection, told anecdotes with a sort of exaggerated modesty. Croizier, a man of tremendous appetite himself, admired Castaing as he disposed of quantities of food, washed down with big glasses of wine. And, suddenly, Lespard noted that Croizier had seen through his friend's pose, knew its purpose, appreciated him as an intelligent and ambitious fellow with a disarming exterior.

A week later, the major commanding the battalion summoned Castaing for a private interview. When the captain returned to the shack he shared with Lespard, he took two drinks of brandy, then told his story.

"A service order came through transferring me to Rabat for special duty. The old man's sore, wants me to stay. Says I shouldn't quit the battalion during a campaign. He came near accusing me of deserting. We had a few stiff words; my bridges are burned."

"We're attacking in the morning," Lespard said.

"That's what he said, too. And that the men counted on me to lead them. Damn it, if I were killed, they'd be without me, too!"

"Right. Suppose I don't say anything, François."

"You blame me, don't you?"

"No. It's your life. What do you think they'll give you to do?"

"Well, I sold Croizier on the idea that I knew Morocco as only a practical soldier can know it, and he's arranged to assign me on a government commission to investigate natural resources." Castaing looked at Lespard, waiting for an answer, then started to shout: "Why don't you say something? I know it's a sinecure, a dugout, but damn it all, haven't I earned it? I risked my hide for thirteen years, I've bled and I've starved enough."

"What is there to be said?"

"Nothing, as long as you haven't the nerve to call me a quitter. Look, Charles, I'd stay for that damn attack." He leaned very near. "But as sure as hell, I'd get killed. I'm afraid, deflated. You know I'd get killed, don't you, if I tempted fate now?"

"It's happened," Lespard conceded.

"You see. Will you shake hands?"

"You big ass," Lespard laughed, clasping his hand. "Nobody doubts your guts. You yell because you're heart-broken at leaving, yet you want to run your chance at this new thing."

Castaing lowered his head. He had taken off his faded, patched tunic, and was fingering the collar badges: The grenade of the Legion, which he had worn a third of his existence, which he was losing the right to wear.

"It's tough, sure," he murmured. "But I'm no sucker."

He was expected to be present at the six o'clock roll-call, to take leave of his men. The four sections, decimated by constant combat, turned out with equipment and buttons shining. But he did not appear; he had left at five in a staff-car. Castaing, the hero, the matchless soldier, had sneaked away. Lespard and his men knew why: He could not have left if he had seen *his* men, *his* company, when he knew they would attack in the morning.

His superstitious belief proved correct. The lieutenant who replaced him for the attack was killed before he had covered a hundred yards. The sub-lieutenant who took his place was knocked out with a shattered knee, crippled for life. The senior-sergeant who followed was shot through the heart.

Man after man dropped as the advance progressed, the sections melted away. Castaing seemed to have taken their luck away with him. At twilight, there were no officers left standing, but a few non-coms. The survivors were distributed to other companies. Castaing's crack unit had vanished.

The major thought of sending the company's small flag to its old commander. It was bullet-torn and decorated. Then he shrugged sadly and shook his head: "No, it would seem like a reproach."

And Lespard agreed.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

They Serve and Are Forgotten

WINTER of 1925 found the French back to the former frontier, and with the spring, the struggle entered its final phase. Squeezed from the south by more than a hundred thousand soldiers, attacked from the north by a reorganized Spanish army, Abd-el-Krim was doomed. His occult European partners had left him to his fate, his tribes were going over to his foes one by one.

"They're catching it, this time," a sergeant said behind Lespard.

The captain nodded, without a word. Thirteen months ago, many of his comrades had died because France had no troops and no material for Morocco. Now, the positions of the Riffi, a few hundred meters away along the crests of the Jebel Hammam, were battered by a rain of explosives. Fast planes flew behind the enemy's lines, swooping into ravines to disperse reserves.

Victory was so near that the civilian administration which had followed Marshal Lyautey was already proclaiming its generosity and leniency to a gallant loser. France, it was announced throughout the press, wanted to forgive the misguided heroes who had fought her, sought no vengeance.

The men who did the actual fighting somehow felt more bitter. They admired and respected the enemy, for his tremendous endurance and superb courage. But they had recovered the mutilated bodies of their mates, knew they had been mercilessly tortured. They had seen rows of heads adorning stone fences, clusters of heads suspended from olive trees. And, as the Legionnaires often said, they now held the clean end of the stick, and should be given a chance to settle old scores.

Dubreuil, Lespard's lieutenant, touched his arm: "Our turn in a moment, captain."

Lespard again nodded, and was amused. Did the young chap really believe that he was unconcerned, would not remember? When the signal came, he stepped into the open first, lifted his cane to indicate the objective. The pistol remained in its holster at his belt. For, like many old-timers in the corps, he now carried a light walking-stick into action—a cane, his decorations and a new kepi without khaki cover. As Denoyel had stated, one became something of a mountebank!

"En avant, la légion!"

The combat groups plodded upward behind him, with mechanical precision, spaced as at drill. The world had not seen such soldiers since the end of the Napoleonic epic. Half of his men were veterans of the Great War, almost all the others had long combat experience in Morocco.

The sections moved forward alternately, supported by the inter-locking fire of automatics and the indirect discharges of heavy machine guns. From the rifle-pits ahead, many shots greeted them, native wounded selling their lives, the most resolute burning their last cartridges. At the first objective, a fold of soil creasing the incline, there was a quick rush, the bright swoops of bayonets, butts rising and falling. Then the green smoke signal was kindled.

Lespard paced the length of his company's front, gave needed orders. Section chiefs sent runners to report: "Two men killed, one wounded . . . one killed, seven wounded . . ." and Lespard's mind caught the details—seven wounded, that must have been when the Moors had thrown grenades, to his right.

"Forward."

The whistles shrilled all along the lines. Somewhere on the field, Senegalese troops were engaged, pushing a charge home, for he heard the strident cry of the Bambaras: *"Fara, fara,* kill, kill!" His Legionnaires followed, in a thumping of hob-nailed boots, a clatter of equipment. They reached the rifle-pits along the crest, the objective for the afternoon.

Half-naked natives scrambled out of them, passed over the edge, scuttled down the far slope. There were swarms of them, all headed for a narrow gorge almost a kilometer below. The Legionnaires now went slowly, disposing of the stragglers.

LESPARD walked around a clump of spiny bushes, rounded a big stone. Something moved behind it, on his right,

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and he half-turned. A man in a dark *jellaba* leaped at him, slashing at his stomach with an upward sweep of a large knife. He avoided the blow, twisting to the left, swung his cane. He hit the man across the face. After that it was easy for a man familiar with fencing and stick work to rap the fool's wrist and knock the blade from his grip. A private ran up, swung his rifle and brought the butt down on the nape of the native's neck as he stooped to retrieve the weapon.

Then Lespard forgot the incident for some time. The position had to be organized, the defenses reversed. Routine work, but calling for close attention. A slight mistake might expose a group of men to flanking fire.

He was vaguely aware that the man who had attacked him seemed familiar. A wide, ugly mouth, piercing eyes, a fringe of beard—these fitted hundreds of mountaineers. He went down the slope, to the spot where his orderly had erected a canvas lean-to. The wounded and the prisoners were not far away, sheltered behind boulders.

"A prisoner wants to talk to you, Captain," a sergeant came to report. "No mistake, he knows your name."

"Can he walk?" Lespard asked. "Then bring him here."

This time, Lespard recognized Moussa el Daburki at once. His head was shaven, bare; he wore the black garb of a Riff regular, held snug at the waist by a red sash over which a leather belt was buckled. He ranked as a *tabor,* commanding from five hundred to a thousand men. As blood oozed from his nostrils, probably from the blow on his neck, and as his hands were tied behind his back, one of his guards kept wiping his chin and lips with a comical semblance of solicitude.

"Greetings, Captain Lespard."

"Greetings, Moussa el Daburki."

"I am to be shot, am I not?"

"Very likely, Moussa el Daburki. Not because you killed the captain, but because you did not kill him in battle. I heard that he was wounded before you found him."

"Yes, his knee was broken. And his arm had been cut, too. I then shot him once, in the face." Moussa smiled reminiscently. "He had pride in his handsome face. Then as some of the women who had lost their men in the fighting screamed to have him, I gave him up. It was that evening, after he died, that I cut off his head."

Lieutenant Dubreuil, who had come up and heard, grew very pale. Lespard checked him with a glance. Moussa el Daburki was a prisoner, hurt, helpless—and moreover was talking to infuriate them.

"The court martial will be interested."

"Why delay? Talking, so much talking," Moussa insisted. "My hour has come."

He knew it was all over, that in a couple of days Abd-el-Krim would surrender, that he no longer had master, country nor cause. He asked to have his hands freed, water brought for his ablutions, a short time for a last prayer.

Admittedly, Lespard stretched a point. He dreaded official clemency, handed out so recklessly. Pity at this point would cost the French prestige in Moussa's case. The man might be sentenced to some years in prison, be pardoned in a batch of prisoners, to go back to the hills and be pointed out as the man who had murdered the famous French *Kaid,* Denoyel, and had got away with it. Moreover, Moussa was a deserter from the Spanish forces, and deserters captured with arms in hand were liable to immediate execution.

"As you wish, Moussa."

The native prepared himself for death calmly. He prostrated himself and prayed. Six men and a sergeant lined up, in readiness.

"Will my head be cut off—afterward?" Moussa asked.

"The French do not cut heads, Moussa el Daburki."

"They do sometimes," Moussa retorted. "Farewell, Captain Lespard."

His hands were bound again. The noncom made the usual offer of a bandage to cover the eyes. Moussa laughed and spat between the soldier's feet.

"Ready — arms! Shoulder arms! Aim—"

Moussa's eyes followed the line of rifles, then lifted, staring above the Legionnaires' heads. The six bullets knocked

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him back two staggering steps, he buckled at the knees, fell on his right side. A second later, the sergeant's pistol shattered his skull with the mercy shot.

Dubreuil uncorked a flask, drank deeply, then, with a smile of apology, handed it to his superior. The men of the firing-squad also lifted their canteens. Two prisoners came, with a saddle-blanket, to carry their chief away.

"Going to make a report of this, Captain?" Dubreuil asked.

"Regulations. Yes, why not?"

"You know the general orders?"

"Yes. Don't apply in this case. Fellow was an assassin. You heard him. He boasted of it."

"Still, I wouldn't say anything."

"He asked for it; it would have been more cruel to keep him in jail for months before execution. He thought so himself." Lespard paused and then struck a fist against his palm. "He took us in, damn it, he took us in!"

"How, Captain?"

"Well, as there is to be no more execution of military captives, he would have been tried for a civil crime. And he was afraid he'd be guillotined. And be lifted into Paradise without his body!"

TWO things happened the next day: Abd-el-Krim and his brother surrendered to the French, and Lespard stopped a sniper's bullet.

After more than a year of hardships and campaigning without a serious injury, he fell at almost the last moment. The missile fractured his left shoulderblade, missed the heart by a tenth of an inch, and for some weeks prevented his being much interested in what was going on about him.

He was waiting for permission to start on a convalescence leave to France when a friend from the battalion, a stout captain eight or nine years his senior, dropped in to see him. He gave news of mutual friends, chatted about recent events, but was so embarrassed that the young man asked him what was the matter.

"You'll have to know some time. Nothing to it, of course—the whole battalion's with you—"

The incoherent statements at length started to make sense, and he gathered that he, Captain Charles Lespard, Field Battalion of Foreign Legion, would have to face a special investigation. Not an honest court martial, not a disciplinary council of officers, which would have sentenced him or cleared him, but an investigation whose findings would remain private and leave suspicion clinging to him. He was to explain why he had executed, without any form of trial, Moussa el Daburki, a gallant chieftain of the late rebel forces, a knightly Moor who had done his duty as a patriot!

"Go over it again, slower," Lespard invited. He had laughed, which made his back ache. "Who says all that, the Native Intelligence Service, the General Staff—who?"

"The papers, Lespard. They ask for an investigation."

Lespard understood now why the nurses had infuriated him by giving him mutilated copies. His friend had brought some clippings, which he fished from a worn wallet.

Lespard learned facts about himself he had never suspected. For instance, that he was like the majority of professional officers in the regular French Army, a partisan of the restoration of royalty. His own impression had been that his grandfather had been a hot Bonapartist and that his father was a conservative republican. But there it was, in print. Just why his being a royalist had led to his shooting Moussa was not quite clear.

"Where am I to be investigated? By whom?"

"At Rabat. There's a special committee." The other smiled sadly. "You're not the only one. Luckily, it's a formality. They're not tough, as a rule."

Lespard left Meknes Hospital, where he had been treated, and went to Rabat, on the coast. He had not been in his hotel room fifteen minutes when Castaing came in. He wore an horizon-blue uniform, with the number of a home regiment. His tall, wide silhouette was trim and impressive. Decorations glinted on his tunic; his sandy mustache was carefully trimmed.

"How did you know I was in town?" Lespard asked.

"What do you think the information service's for? I happened to be in the

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office when your name came in. Galloped right over. You're having dinner with me tonight." Castaing caught himself. "No, can't make it. Ordered duty dinner tonight. I'll pick you up here after and show you the town. Say nine-thirty, ten o'clock."

"You know what I am here for?"

"Sure," Castaing nodded. "I'll fix that, don't worry. Why didn't you drop me a line?"

"You mean there won't be any investigation?"

"No," Castaing declared. "That's all nonsense. I phoned in at once. They know Croizier's back of me to the limit. We're like that—" the big chap extended his hand, one finger over the other. "There's a guy to work for. They'll leave you alone."

Castaing rang the bell and ordered an absinthe. "The papers got hold of the story from your own report to your commanding officer—and why did they find the report? Because they were combing everything about you to find some way of discrediting you before you got back to France."

"But why were they interested in me in the first place?"

"You wrote to that journalist who did that sad job on Denoyel's murder, didn't you, although I warned you to drop the matter?"

"Oh, yes," Lespard remembered now. "But I did not write officially. I specified it was not for publication but simply to straighten out the facts. I was careful to control myself, wrote as if I believed he had made an honest mistake. Come, old man, I owed it to Denoyel."

"Sure. But Denoyel's younger brother made a fuss, exacted a written apology, which the paper had to give, and they're afraid he'll sue if he can get a creditable witness to testify. So the paper's direction took steps to smear you up."

CHAPTER NINE

Peacetime Soldier

UPON returning from convalescence, Lespard was assigned to a replacement battalion for Indo-China. He saw some service against the Moi tribes of the jungle, shot a couple of tigers and leopards, visited China and Japan during his leaves.

On the homeward voyage, three years later, he met Marguerite Van Lunden. She was nineteen years old, tall, willowy, an excellent dancer. Her mother had been a Frenchwoman, her father was a Hollander, so her Dutch yellow hair contrasted with great dark eyes. She and Lespard danced, they flirted in the moonlight, and a month after the ship had docked at Marseilles, they were married and went on a cruise to Norway.

When his leave expired, she accompanied him to Morocco. She had visited the country as a tourist, and loved it. And she liked the city of Meknes well enough. Then he was assigned to a small town in the Middle Atlas, on a windswept, stony plateau. Marguerite soon showed impatience with the wives of other officers, concerned with their children, the misbehaviors of servants and orderlies and a mysterious process absolutely unknown to her—"making ends meet."

On the other hand, the conservative bourgeoises did not approve of her, disliked her habit of serving cocktails instead of tea, were shocked at the shorts she wore to play tennis, at the breeches she wore to ride horseback, at the extreme cut of her evening-dresses.

Marguerite grew angry when Lespard suggested that she might be more demure, more diplomatic. She pointed out that the Legionnaires, who certainly were not angels, liked and respected her, that the gossips could point to nothing serious. She would not ape "those nasty, antediluvian camels and their wall-eyed heifers."

Orderlies and servants were neither deaf nor dumb; her words, uttered loudly enough, it is true, were overheard and repeated. The atmosphere became hostile.

Probably by pure coincidence, Lespard was assigned to a Field Battalion that was to tour the hills on a police operation for from six months to a year. Naturally, women could not go along, as there would be some fighting, so that Marguerite went to France.

Lespard heard of the birth of his first son via military radio, message relayed by Meknes Headquarters. While the event had not been unexpected, the knowledge that there was another Charles

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Lespard in the world, weight eight pounds, dazzled him.

A week later, a delegation of his men presented him with a gift from the company—hand-carved miniature wooden shoes, adorned on top with the grenade of the Legion. Lespard held the tiny *sabots* on his palm. Two hundred kilometers from shops, a present for a baby was hard to manage. This was perfect—represented so much thought and labor. He uttered strangled thanks.

By coincidence again, Lespard was given the softest assignments from then on. He noticed that when bullets flew about, his men grew very concerned. He understood that they wanted him to see his child as much as he wanted to see him.

ON HIS next leave to France, Marguerite insisted that he should transfer to a home regiment. She enlisted Castaing's services. The big man was a major now, had been promoted without risk while Lespard, with five additional years of colonial duty in, remained a captain.

"What do you do, anyway?" Lespard asked him.

"I'm a gangster," Castaing laughed. "Or almost. You know how the old politicians like Concini, Mazarin, Choiseul, kept private swordsmen? When Croizier needs someone talked to, he sends me. I don't fight duels with swords or pistols. But I am large and uncouth. I can cause embarrassment."

In fact, he looked younger and trimmer than he had in the Legion, and he explained that he attended a gymnasium, was massaged, and rode horseback two hours every morning. He wore well-cut civilian clothes, lived in a vast, luxurious apartment, drove a fast motor car, frequented night-clubs, knew dozens of pretty girls. Still the army, he was detached "on special duty," and in reality worked for Crozier.

Through him, Lespard obtained a transfer to a Line Regiment garrisoned in an eastern provincial city. His new men were conscripts serving the short regular term, and he understood at once that he was more a teacher than an officer. One could not handle these big boys like seasoned Legionnaires. They were ready to dislike him, already grumbled about "that brute of a colonial." Before long, his fine appearance, his decorations, his endurance, his friendliness, won them.

His company took on "Legion polish," prided itself on marching farther, shooting better, keeping cleaner, than any other in the whole division.

After a few months of this system, an inspecting general sent for Lespard, following the review. "Did my heart good to see your men go by, Captain. I told your colonel that you had served in the Legion just from seeing your company."

Other subalterns, who received no special compliments from the visiting general, muttered that he was turning out a gang of apaches. They were quiet, honest fellows, with plain wives and large families, little ambition beyond reaching retirement age with a fair rank and no trouble. It was true that Lespard's men drank and fought more than their share.

"You should tighten the reins a bit, Lespard," the colonel told him.

"I have no trouble with them, Colonel."

"Yes, yes, I know. But this is France, not Morocco."

Lespard concealed his irritation. "Am I to understand, Colonel, that I am to punish my soldiers on the complaint of a cafe-keeper who's had some of his glasses broken?"

"There's a midway course, Lespard." The colonel cleared his throat. "By the way, my wife tells me that Madame Lespard has not called in some weeks. I do hope she isn't ill."

So, Lespard thought, that was the real trouble. The colonel's wife was offended!

HIS second son, Louis, was four months old, he explained to his chief, and needed close attention. Lespard went home, ready to sympathize with Marguerite, but at the first words he uttered she flew into a rage. She said that she was weary of spending two or three hours every Tuesday afternoon snapping to attention before Madame the Colonel, who commanded the women as her husband commanded the husbands. She was sick of sly lectures on the proper behavior of a young captain's wife.

Lespard admitted that the old lady was

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hard to get along with, but pointed out that he was a married officer, that tradition made it imperative for his wife to call regularly on his superior's wives. She said she was through, that she was not in the army. He said that he was, had his career to consider. Then she gave him a brief, tense sketch of what she thought of his career, of his pay—on which he was supposed to keep two horses, two orderlies, two children and a wife.

He reminded her that although her income was four or five times the combined sum of his pay and his family revenue, he had never used her money for the household. He said that she should have married a fortune-hunter, with all his time to devote to her entertainment. She replied crushingly that he should have married the colonel's flat-chested daughter, who wore long woolen underwear at thirty-eight francs the set.

She left for Holland the following day, with the boys and the Dutch nurse, to join her father, on vacation from Java.

A fortnight later, Lespard obtained leave and went to Amsterdam. He suggested to his wife that he would transfer back to the Legion, and that she could reside in one of the large cities, some distance from his post, where he could come for frequent visits. She objected that the climate would be hard for the boys in the summer, mentioned the heat, the flies, the poor sanitary conditions. Would she then consent to live with his family? She would not—anything she did would be reported to him distorted, enlarged. She wanted it understood that she did not want provincial life any longer.

"What then?" he shouted. "I'm too old to start a business career. And I can't go through the rest of my life twiddling my thumbs, can I?"

Later, Marguerite's father, Van Lunden, invited him into his study. Van Lunden was a large, pink, round-faced gentleman of fifty-four. He liked Lespard very much, and told him so. His daughter, he granted, was unreasonable, selfish, but that was the way she was.

He had a solution: Lespard would resign from the French Army, and go to work for him. He mentioned a salary that was more than six times a captain's pay —as a start.

"Otherwise—" Lespard paused.

"Otherwise," sighed the older man, "Marguerite's mind is made up. A divorce. She told me: 'He must choose between me and the Army.' So, Charles, which will it be?"

To be continued in the next issue

A Gallery of Pirates

4. Mary Read and Anne Bonny

THE Spanish Main was a man's world, but for two young women of energy and determination it proved a world of equal though most unladylike opportunity. They were Mary Read and Anne Bonny, the only two female pirates of this period, and the authenticated records of their careers show striking points of similarity.

Both were illegitimate and both, for a while at least, were brought up in boy's clothing. Under the Jolly Roger, both of them served with Captain Rackam, and according to witnesses at their trial no members of the company were more resolute in times of action than these two. Mary Read came to the dishonorable business of piracy after serving on a man-of-war and as a foot soldier and cavalryman, concealing her sex with remarkable success until she fell in love with a fellow trooper, resigned from her regiment and married the man. Her husband died soon afterward and she, on a trip to the West Indies, was captured by pirates; her life was spared when Mary, again posing as a male, joined the company.

Anne, meanwhile, had migrated with her lawyer father to Carolina, and had been disinherited when she married a worthless young sailor who took her to the Island of Providence. There she fell out with her husband and in with Rackam the pirate—and, affecting men's clothing, went to sea with him.

Anne was less careful than Mary at hiding her sex. But love found Anne out, for all her pains. She fell in love with an engaging young man of the Rackam company. When he got into a quarrel with one of the other pirates and was challenged to a duel on shore, she was so fearful of the outcome that she promptly picked a fight with the other fellow, fought him with sword and pistol, and killed him on the spot. When the Rackam crew was finally captured and brought to trial, both girls escaped the gallows on the mercy of the court. Mary died in prison and Anne, eventually, went free.

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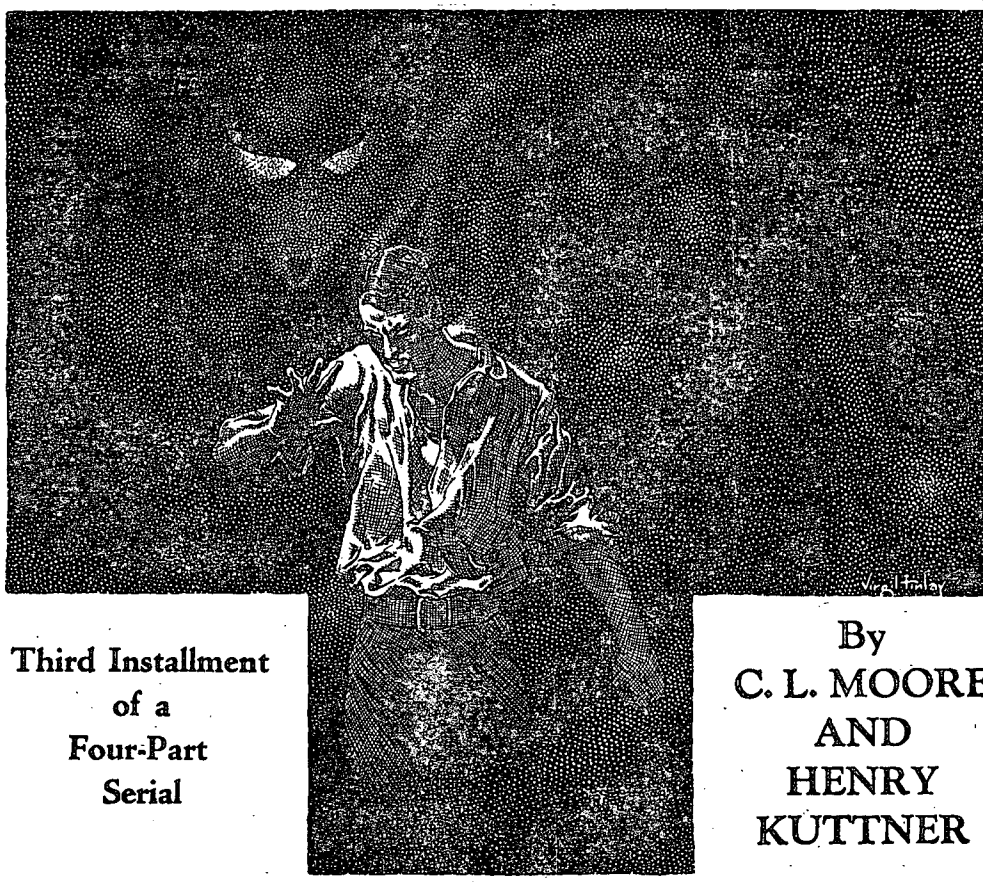

Third Installment of a Four-Part Serial

By C. L. MOORE AND HENRY KUTTNER

EARTH'S LAST CITADEL

Driven by his inhuman hunger, the Light-Wearer strikes —and Alan Drake faces the enemy of all mankind

Synopsis

ALAN DRAKE of U. S. Army Intelligence has been assigned the difficult task of protecting a distinguished Scottish scientist named Sir Colin Douglas. Stranded in the desert with Sir Colin, Alan fears capture by two Nazi hirelings—the beautiful spy, Karen Martin, and a former American gangster named Mike Smith.

These ruthless enemies do capture them, but by then the capture is no longer important. For Alan and Sir Colin have discovered a monstrous, strangely glowing sphere which appears to have risen out of the desert sand. Some alien power compels the four of them to enter a door in the side of the sphere, and once inside they are swept into a kind of drugged sleep.

They awaken with only a faint memory of something called the Alien. But when they step out of the sphere, they find themselves in a strange gray world—a world of twilight and unfeatured landscape, drifting with mist. Far in the distance a huge and fantastic structure rears against the moon, and they proceed toward it—shocked with the realization that they have been transported countless centuries ahead into a world that is slowly dying.

At last they encounter a living creature

Illustrated by Virgil Finlay

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—a girl of unreal fragility and beauty who calls herself Evaya. She leads them into a hillside corridor and into a vast cavern which houses a dream-world city—a city of lovely colors and graceful, amazing patterns, defying all the laws of physics known to twentieth-century man. Evaya calls the city *Carcasilla.*

Here the ruler is a being named Flande, who is no more than a great ageless face to Alan Drake and his companions. By telepathic communication Flande attempts to question them, quickly wearies of them—and summons a band of barbarians. In a battle with these ragged barbarians —called the Terasi—Drake is struck unconscious and his companions captured.

For a long time Alan lives in a state of semi-consciousness, aware only that Evaya is tending him and that she and her people bathe him in a fountain in the center of the city. The secret properties of the fountain give him new strength, bring him back to consciousness so endowed that he does not feel hunger or weariness.

From Evaya, whom he finds to be fascinatingly real, Alan learns something of this strange city. It was built and ruled by super-beings known as the Light-Wearers, who conquered the earth and vanished long ago. Evaya, made immortal by the magic fountain, was once a priestess to them, and she tells Alan that lately she has felt a call, a summoning, as if one of the Light-Wearers was somewhere near. Alan realizes that this must be the alien presence sensed by him and his companions.

And then, while they are talking, Evaya is drawn into a spell by a force which Alan, too, can feel. The Light-Wearer is coming! Answering its call, the people of Carcasilla gather before the entrance corridor, and through the corridor comes striding a huge, shapeless figure, its light-robes swirling about it, bursting into the violent daylight of the cavern city.

CHAPTER NINE

The Light-Wearer

ALAN'S confused impressions of the thing were too contradictory to have meaning. Was it monstrously tall? He could not tell, even as it stood there against the black mouth of the disc. Had it been blazingly robed in light against that blackness? He couldn't be sure. For, here in the light of the city, it was dark—a billowing darkness that swooped down upon its worshipers with a terrible avidity. It enveloped Evaya, who was foremost, in a cloud of nothingness, as if great unseen arms had seized her up in a devouring embrace.

Alan could not stir. His mind had congealed inside his congealed body and he could only stand and stare, drowning in helpless wonder as he watched. For here at last, tangibly before him, was the nameless thing that had haunted all the hours of his awakening and the fathomless hours of his sleep. The questing creature that had run upon his tracks in the mist, the enigmatic watcher from the Citadel, the being whose dreams he had shared altogether too closely, in the long night-time of the ship.

He stared in frozen dismay as Evaya vanished into the cloudy grip of the Alien. Surely the Carcasillians had come to worship, expecting benediction—not this! This avid clutching grasp, as if the creature had been starving for countless centuries. . . .

Before the crowd about him could catch its breath the tall, blindingly robed figure—was it dark or light?—had tossed Evaya aside with a gesture almost of impatience, and was striding down upon the next nearest. It swooped and seized and enveloped with motion so incredibly swift that the Carcasillians could not have turned or fled even if they wished. And the great, striding god went through them like a reaper through grain, snatching up, enveloping, hurling aside figure after figure, and flashing on to the next.

Far back in Alan's brain, behind the helpless horror, the terrible revulsion, the more terrible taint of kinship with this being whose dreams he had known—lay one small corner of detached awareness. In that corner of his mind he watched and reasoned with a coolness that almost matched Sir Colin's scientific detachment. "It can't get at them," he told himself. "Somehow they're protected. Somehow the good Light-Wearers gave them armor to wear—like a spiked collar for their

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pets. Whatever it wants it isn't getting it here. Not yet. . ."

The stooping and rising and inevitable nearing of that figure almost shook even the cool corner of his brain as it came closer and closer, reaping among the standing rows of Carcasillians. Alan strained vainly at his frozen limbs. Now it was two rows ahead of him. Now it was one— Tall, formless, all but invisible in its robes that were both lightness and dark. . .

The towering, inhuman thing stooped above his head with an avid swoop; its robes fell about him like blindness to shut out the violet day. He felt a vortex of hungry violence sweeping him up. Vertigo—gravity falling away beneath him—

And then a strange, indescribable, long-drawn "Ah-h-h!" of inhuman satisfaction breathing voiceless through his brain. And a probing—eager, ravenous, ruthless—as if intangible fingers were thrusting down all through his mind, his body, among his nerves, into his very soul. They were bruising fingers that in a moment would rip him inside out, bodily and mentally, as a fish might be gutted.

Instinct made him stiffen against them, with a stiffening of more than muscles. His mind went rigid in anger and rebellion, along with his body. And the being that clutched him hesitated. He could feel its surprise and uncertainty, and he struck out into the blindness with futile fists, gasping choked curses that were less words than anger made audible. He was awake now, vividly, painfully awake as he had not been since his first bath in the fountain. And he fought with all the fury that was in him against this devouring thing that was—he knew it now—starving with an inhuman hunger for the life-force he was fighting to protect. This much he knew, in that inviolable corner of the brain where reason still dwelt. This creature was evil made incarnate, and its hunger was diabolic now. It could not touch the Carcasillians; he was its last hope. Its struggles to overpower him were as desperate in their way as his were to be free.

FOR one timeless instant Alan shared its hunger. And he shared its dismay and sorrow. He knew what it was to wake upon a dying world and find only the ruined relics of kinsmen that once had ruled the planet. Ruin and starvation and unthinkable loneliness.

He felt those gutting fingers thrust down along the track of the understanding thoughts, deep into his awareness, ripping and tearing.

He closed his mind like a steel trap against the treacherous sympathy of those thoughts, closed it as if he closed his eyes to shut out a terrible sight. With a brain tight-shut against everything but the danger he must fight, he stiffened against that probing, ravenous need raging all about him.

And he was holding his own. He sensed that. By fighting with every ounce of strength in him, he could hold his own. And when that strength began to fail. . .

The blindness around him rifted now and again in his timeless, furious, voiceless fight. He could catch glimpses of violet light and the awed faces of the Carcassilians, and then dark again. Dark, and the starving desperation of the Alien tearing at him in a vortex of inhuman, demanding need.

And then, suddenly and bewilderingly—the bellow of gunfire.

That half-tangible grip upon him jolted—staggered—slipped away. Alan reeled back upon the slope of the white ramp, too dizzy to see anything clearly, knowing only in this moment that he was free and still alive. And then he heard—or was it a dream again?—a familiar, rasping voice, burred with strong emotion.

"Alan, laddie—gie us yer han'! Alan, here I am, laddie! It's Colin—here!"

Hard fingers dug into his arm and a ruddy, bearded face, grinning with strain, thrust close to his. "Come awa', laddie—hurry! Can ye no see they're angry? Come awa'!"

Surprise had lost all power over Alan. Sir Colin, miraculously returned from oblivion, was not enough to startle him now. He wrenched away from that urgent grip on his arm, his mind taking up automatically what had been blanked out of it when the Light-Wearer swooped down.

"Evaya—" he said hoarsely, finding his throat raw as if he had been shouting. Perhaps he had, in the blindness and silence of the Alien's embrace. "Evaya—"

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He had seen her last lying on the white ramp in a crumple of gossamer garments and showering hair. She was still there, but on her feet now and looking down at him still with that face of inhuman ivory, the eyes blank mirrors that reflected only what the Light-Wearer whispered in her brain.

The Light-Wearer! Alan whirled, remembering, not feeling the tug upon his arm as Sir Colin rumbled an urgent warning. He could see the Light-Wearer at the very edge of vision, hovering cloudily down the slope. He did not dare look directly at it. The bewildering thing hurt his very brain as the eyes are hurt by brilliance.

It was the gunfire that had jolted it. He was still half in rapport with the creature from that terrible intimacy of the fingers prying down into his brain. He knew it was hesitating, torn between fear of the crashing thunder again, and that intolerable hunger still driving it on.

He could not bring himself to face it, but he knew when it decided what to do. He looked up at Evaya a moment before her toneless puppet-voice broke the quivering silence. It was the Light-Wearer who spoke, but the people turned to Evaya to hear the words it was putting into her mouth.

"Take them!" cried her voice, with a timbre of inhuman fury in it that was not Evaya's. Her arm came up in a commanding gesture that carried a dreadful hint of hovering robes—as if her possession were so complete that even the garment of the Light-Wearer were subtly visible around her. "Take them!" the inhuman voice thundered from her lips. (How hideous—how unthinkable—that the voice of a being not made of flesh spoke now through these lips of flesh!)

A low murmur of anger rose obediently among the Carcasillians. They rolled forward toward the two men, blind, hypnotic fury on their faces. Beyond them the half-seen figure of the Light-Wearer shimmered like smoke upon the air. Alan could feel its hunger beating out at him.

One moment more he hesitated. The memory of Flande had come back and he was searching these blank, threatening faces before him. Was one of them Flande? Or was Flande human at all? Was he watching imperturbably through the showers of his raining tower?

"Damn ye, mon, wake up!" roared Sir Colin in his ear. "Ye aren't worth rescuing! Are ye comin' or aren't ye?"

Alan shook himself awake. "Yes," he said. "I'm coming."

The rising murmur of the Carcasillians sounded louder behind them as they hurried up the ramp. Alan hesitated with a moment's shuddering memory of the funnel of infinite blackness down which the Light-Wearer had come striding. The thought of entering it was worse than the thought of turning to face what lay behind him. But when he looked the tunnel was no longer there. The great round disc of the gateway opened now upon a passage of gray stone slanting away into dimness outside the violet daylight of Carcasilla's cavern.

Alan glanced back. Evaya lifted a face rigid as ice to him, a blind stare through which the Light-Wearer looked terribly into his eyes. Sir Colin called, "Hurry, mon!" in a voice that reverberated hollowly from the walls of the low passage outside.

Alan stepped through the gateway and out of Carcasilla.

CHAPTER TEN

The Way of the Gods

THUNDER bellowed from Sir Colin's gun as Alan cleared the threshold. The noise was deafening; flinders of stone flew from the corridor's walls as the air re-echoed with the sound of the shot. Alan turned in bewilderment, to see the ruddy Scot's face of his companion wrinkling in a satisfied grin. "I thought so," Sir Colin said, lowering his gun. "Look."

A darkness was thickening over the doorway to Carcasilla. The violet light that poured through it dimmed as they watched, and within moments the barrier of darkness had closed over this gateway to shut them out, as the door of light they had first entered had closed to shut them in.

"It hates noise," Sir Colin grunted. "And it's still—maybe not sure of itself. I've had to use my gun on the domned thing before."

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Alan did not at once realize the import of the words. He stared at the black circle upon the wall, a closed gate beyond which the Light-Wearer stood alone with Evaya and her people. He knew it did not belong there. The nameless builder of Carcasilla had put up barriers to keep out just such creatures as that. But now the dream-like city belonged to it, and the dream-like people, and Evaya whom he had known so briefly and so well—Evaya, the most dream-enchanted of them all, with her eyes that reflected the Alien thoughts and her body the instrument for Alien commands.

Sir Colin followed his gaze. "It's all right," he said. "The Light-Wearer can't hurt them. You saw that. But it could hurt us. We're lucky to get away so easily. I doubt if I'd have dared tackle that—that *thing*—if I hadn't seen it driven back by the Terasi's drums."

Alan looked at him, belated amazement welling up now that the crisis was over. The Scotsman had obviously been through strenuous activity since their parting. Scars and bruises showed through his ragged clothing, and there were new lines in his haggard face. But the red beard, unkempt and roughly trimmed, jutted with the same arrogant cocksureness.

"The Terasi drums? Those savages—how did you get away from them? And Karen—she's alive?"

Sir Colin patted the air soothingly with a big hand. "Karen and Mike are both verra much alive, laddie. But we'll talk as we go. And mind you keep a sharp lookout, too. The Way of the Gods isna so safe for men!"

"Way of the Gods?" Alan followed the Scotsman's gesture along the shadowy, ruinous corridor stretching before them. Once it might have been wider and higher, but it could never have been ornate, he thought. Now the broken walls gaped into darkness here and there, blocking the pavement with fallen stones. "What gods?" he asked. "Why?"

"They call it that—the Terasi, I mean. And the gods were the Light-Wearers, of course. Didn't ye learn anything at all in Carcasilla?"

"I know that much, sure," Alan said, following Sir Colin over the broken stones that heaped the corridor floor. Here in the semi-twilight of ruin, Carcasilla's perfection seemed like a dream already. But it was hard to leave. He looked back over his shoulder at the closed black gateway upon the wall.

"It's the best way, laddie," Sir Colin said gruffly. "Come along. You'll realize that when I tell you what's happened. And keep your eyes open as we go."

"What do you expect?" Alan glanced uneasily about in the dimness.

"Anything at all. This was a—a sort of experimental laboratory for the Light-Wearers once. The Carcasillians are one result. There were others." He nodded toward a gap in the wall, darkness within it. "*Something* used to live there, I suppose. And there, and there. Carcasilla's the last perfect experiment, but not all the others died at once."

Nothing moved but the rubble under their feet. But the dark doorways were numerous now, and Alan felt uneasily that things were watching as they stumbled over the stones. "What's happened?" he demanded. "Where's Karen? And Mike?"

"Back in the Terasi cavern, laddie."

"Prisoners?"

Sir Colin laughed. "No. At least—not Terasi prisoners. But I'm thinking we may all be prisoners of the Alien, my boy, and not quite realize it yet. . . . No, the Terasi aren't quite the savages they look. We found that out. It was our guns that saved us, you see. Not as threats or as weapons, but as a sort of promise instead. A promise of knowledge. They're hungry and thirsty for knowledge, these savages of the tunnels. So at first they kept us alive to learn the secret of the guns—how to make them, where they came from, why they work. They had to teach us their language for that. Ye've been missing a long while, laddie."

"You learned their language?"

"Enough. And now we're allies—against the Alien." He shrugged heavily. "Yes, we have a verra grave task ahead of us, laddie. The rebuilding of a world, perhaps. But we'll talk about that later. Here—we can go faster now."

THE floor before them was a road of shimmering gray metal. No, two roads, separated by a low curbing. Alan

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The tunnel walls moved past them with increasing speed.

heard a rushing sound and felt wind drying the sweat upon his face.

"The Way of the Gods," Sir Colin rumbled. "Follow me now, laddie. Careful does it."

He stepped over gingerly upon the gray road. Instantly his heavy body rose weightless into the air, drifting forward as if upon the current of a slow stream. Over his shoulder he grinned and beckoned. "Come!"

Alan braced himself and stepped uncertainly forward. He felt a giddy vertigo that nauseated him briefly. He shot past Sir Colin in the grip of the invisible air-river, and went dizzily along the tunnel, trying to right himself. Over and over, heels over head. Then Sir Colin's hand, steadying him.

"Don't struggle. Relax now. There. The current's faster toward the middle."

"What is it?" Alan had fallen into a swimmer's position, head lifted, facing in the direction of the current's flow. Sir Colin drifted beside him. The tunnel walls moved past them with increasing speed, a soft murmuring of air in their ears.

"That gray stuff on the floor must cut off gravitation to some extent. Not too much or we'd smash against the roof. The force is angled forward, so we're carried with it. It's a river, Alan. A river of force. The Light-Wearers used it when they traveled the Way of Gods. It's one of the few things that still works in this god-forsaken place. This, and Carcasilla . . . Tell me about it, laddie. What's happened since we left?"

And so Alan told him, drifting along over the gray ribbon of the roadway, through the ruins and the darkness of the dead world. It did not take very long. Sir Colin was silent for awhile as they floated on along the whispering river of air. Then, "Flande," he murmured. "I had wondered about him. Perhaps some day we'll learn the truth. But for the rest, it fits—yes, it fits verra well! I've learned a good deal since we came here, laddie."

"Tell me."

Sir Colin laughed and flapped his hands helplessly. "All at once? There's a lot to be said. Ye know about the Light-Wearers—how they came and conquered. How they cleared the earth of 'vermin' except for the pets they kept, and the experimental races they bred and interbred. Some of 'em—pretty nasty. And some of 'em still alive, the Terasi tell me—

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lurking in the caverns, feeding on each other and anything they can catch. I'd never realized *how* alien the Aliens were until I heard about the things they made out of human flesh in their laboratories here.

"But never mind that now. It's the Terasi ye'll want to know of. Back on their own world, wherever it may ha' been, the Aliens had a slave race. Not human, or even remotely human, but made of flesh like us. Not—well vortices of living energy, or whatever the Aliens are. The slave race may ha' been the Aliens' hands. I'm theorizing, ye ken, but I've found out enough. And ye have to grant those Aliens were builders!" There was awe in the burring voice. "Anyway, when they came here they tried, I think, to make such a race from men. Parts of the brain they must ha' killed; others I believe they stimulated to make men builders, to be their hands as that other race had been. Only—they guessed wrong about humans. The little seeds of rebellion they thought they'd cut away kept growing back. Ah, those robot-humans built machines the like I never saw before. I'll show ye, later. I dinna know what for, but some day I'll learn. But the robot-humans learned something else, laddie. They discovered they were men!"

"Well?"

Sir Colin sighed gently above the soft sighing of the wind that blew along the Way of the Gods. "The Aliens destroyed them," he said abruptly.

Alan knew a sudden pang of loss, irreparable loss, as though history itself had become a book of blank pages.

"It may be," the Scotsman went on after a moment, "that the Terasi are remnants of that race. Or it may be they're descendants of some other experiments the Aliens made. There's been time enough and to spare to let the human race rectify itself again from all the hideous things the Aliens superimposed upon them—if that's what happened. We'll never know, of course.

"The Terasi seem to be the only semblance of an independent human race left here. They're living in the great cave of the machines, where the robot-humans fought their last battles millenniums ago. And they're trying in their clumsy way to learn. Out of sheer thirst for knowledge, because there isn't any hope for the future and they know it well. The Earth's dying and the race of man will have to die too."

HE SIGHED again, heavily, and for awhile they drifted in silence along the slow stream. The tunnel walls went past in the dimness, opening enigmatic arches upon caverns where the creatures of the Aliens must have lived out their misshapen lives so long ago.

"About the Light-Wearer—" Alan prompted presently.

"Oh. Well, he knows he's alone now, and he knows he'll have to die too, if he can't get at us. We were domned lucky back there in the ship, laddie, that he didn't suspect then what had happened. He must ha' wakened and gone in search of the race he led here, and by the time he knew they'd come and ruled and died, we'd escaped. I imagine him going back to the citadel and sending out calls all over the world—and only Evaya answered. He followed us to Carcasilla—remember? He was still unsure then, I think, stunned by the shock of what he'd found here. And afterward, when he knew, he couldn't reach us. You were safe in Carcasilla, and we—well, the Terasi ha' found a way to keep the thing at bay.

"It isna flesh, ye ken. Its metabolism isna human at all. It may have no body as we know bodies. So the bullets I fired didn't hurt the creature. No, I think it was the psychic shock of the concussion. It's a highly specialized being in which body had been sacrificed to mind. Perhaps a vortex of pure force. How can we conceive of such a being!" Sir Colin rubbed his forehead wearily, the slight motion rocking him upon the current of air. "Ye recall what happened back there when the devil attacked ye?"

Alan shivered. "It was in my brain—sucking—"

"So I think it's a mental vampire. It lives on life-force—mental energy—and only the energy of intelligent human beings. The Aliens may ha' bred human slaves for that purpose only. And now this last of them's ravenous—starving. And only we and the Terasi are available now. Ye saw how it cast aside the Carcasillians. They're protected somehow.

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"Well, the Light-Wearer came out of his citadel and went hunting. And he found the Terasi. And he came ravening among them as we saw him come into Carcasilla. But the Terasi have a weapon. They have great gongs that make the whole cavern shiver with noise. And noise those Aliens canna stand. Ye remember Carcasilla is a silent city? So they fight him with noise. He's been besieging them a long while now. We dare not leave the city without portable gongs, and even they aren't really powerful enough. The food-caverns—mushrooms and such-like things—are a little way off from the city, and we can't get enough now. He won't let us. We're starving each other out, really." Sir Colin grinned. "But I think the Alien may win."

"So you came after me alone?"

Sir Colin shrugged. "I had my gun. Besides, you saved my life a few billion years ago, in Tunisia, and I wanted to pay the debt. As for why I delayed—I did come once, and couldn't pass the barrier into Carcasilla. This second time I followed the Alien's track."

This was high courage of a sort Alan had seldom encountered, but he said nothing. After a while the Scotsman went on, "I may ha' done ye no favor in bringing ye out of Carcasilla, after all. It looks as if ye're doomed to starve with the Terasi, or die at last as ye so nearly died in Carcasilla to feed the Alien. I dunno, laddie. I think our fortunes lie with the Terasi, but even if we found a way to beat the Alien—what?"

"If we could kill it somehow, why not go back to Carcasilla? I think there's room even for the Terasi, if—"

"Not they! Not that sterile life! I tell ye, the thirst for knowledge is like a disease with them. They look like savages—only the tough survive—but they've got the brains of forebears who may ha' been magicked by the Aliens into something a little better than human, long ago. They'd die in Carcasilla. And the Carcasillians themselves—they're no canny, Alan. Too close to the Light-Wearers. Did ye sense it? Or are ye too close yerself, Alan laddie? Sometimes I—"

"Don't think it!" Alan said sharply.

"It's something ye canna help. Those dreams in the ship—you had them deeper than we. I canna fight this creature unless I understand it a little. Nobody could. Perhaps through you—well, we'll see. We'll be with the Terasi soon."

SILENCE then, as they were carried on along the stream. Alan was beginning to long for human contacts with part of his mind. Sir Colin's presence had made him realize how lonely he had been in dream-haunted, ageless Carcasilla, among its dwellers as fragile as dolls in their bubble houses lighted by violet translucent air. Yet he hated to leave Carcasilla with so many questions unanswered. And the memory of Evaya burned white in the back of his mind.

Now the Way of the Gods grew wider, and chasms opened in the floor and cracks ran down the ruined walls. Sir Colin touched Alan's arm, drawing him out of the weightless current toward one of the broad splits running from roof to floor.

"Here's our way. There was a gateway into this cavern once, but a shrinking old planet like ours has its quakes. That road's closed. Most of these cracks are blind, but some open in. Here."

Alan glanced on along the Way of the Gods still stretching ahead. "Where does it go?"

"Probably to Hell. I've checked it with what charts I could find—not many—and I think it begins under the citadel we saw back on the plain."

The scientist had produced a taper of some fibrous plant, and lit it. "We've got a hard path to follow."

It wound and twisted upward a long, rough way before light showed ahead, a cold, pale radiance outlining the mouth of a crack like lightning against a night

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sky. Sir Colin put out the torch. Before them the depthless expanse of a cavern loomed.

Alan thought irresistibly of his first glimpse of Carcasilla. Here was a cavern again, and incredible shapes filled it. By this time those shapes were mighty cylinders and bizarre silhouettes rising like water-carved rocks from the sea. It was a city of—machines?

If these were machines indeed, then the Alien concept of machinery was as strange as their concept of human houses in Carcasilla. What lay before Alan was too vast, too breathtakingly immense, to be captured in familiar terms. These towers were machines perhaps, but of a size inconceivable! Only Alien-made metal—or was it plastic—could create such masses that would not topple under their own weight. And they were colored gorgeously and senselessly. Deep colors for the most part. Gargantuan shapes of purple and dark wine-red, and leaning towers of obsidian green.

"Aye," breathed Sir Colin at his elbow. "They were technicians!" There was respect in his voice. And Alan remembered that this cavern had seen perhaps the last rebels of earth, robots turned stubbornly human, fighting and falling before their Alien masters in a saga of courage and futility that was lost like the race that had failed. Only their handiwork remained, enigmatic, impossible.

"What are they for?" he asked Sir Colin futilely. "What *could* they be for?"

"What does it matter, now?" the Scotsman said bitterly. "There isn't any power left in the whole domned planet. Come on down. It's not so safe up here."

THEY mounted a lip of rock, and the rest of the cavern floor was visible below them, a twisting rift of stone leading downward toward it. Against the farther wall Alan could see a huddle of rough huts—more like partitions than like shelters, for what shelter from the elements could men need here? Figures were moving among them, and Alan bristled a little involuntarily. The savage shapes looked dangerous; he could not forget his last meeting with these people.

Beside Sir Colin he crossed the cavern floor, under those incredible behemoths of machines. The light that shone here from sources high up along the walls cast no shadows, although it was dim—dimmer, Alan thought, than it must have been in the beginning. Even the light was going out, here in the dead heart of the dying earth.

Before them shadows stirred, and for one breathtaking instant Alan was back on the shore of the Mediterranean, where Mike and Karen had come out of the Tunisian night with their guns upon him—as they came now.

No one spoke for a moment. There were lines of strain on Karen's keen, pale face, and the blue eyes held an habitual alertness he had seen there before only for brief moments of violent action. Her bronze curls were tousled now, and her clothing tattered, with inexpert mends.

Mike's had not been mended at all. He stood there straddle-legged, a menacing figure of strong bronze, his blunt features restrained to an impassivity more revealing than any scowl. There was an air of iron firmness and strain about him. The sleek black head was roughened now, and he had the beginnings of a black beard. He looked taut as wire—and as dangerous if he should break, Alan thought.

"Anything up?" Sir Colin asked swiftly.

Karen was watching Alan. "No," she said, without looking at the Scotsman. "We saw you coming. Thought we'd come on out. So, Drake, you're still alive."

"We all are," Alan said with a glance at Mike.

"You look damn good," the gunman remarked coldly. "Somebody been feeding you well, eh?"

Alan's mouth quirked. "I haven't eaten anything since I left you."

"Where's Brekkir?" Sir Colin asked.

"In the storage house, checking supplies," Karen told him. "Food's pretty low. If we don't send out another party soon to the food caves, it's going to be too late."

Sir Colin shook his head, lips tight. "I want to talk to Brekkir. Come along, laddie. Ye'll remember Brekkir—the man who stove your ribs in." And the Scotsman smiled grimly.

"I remember," Alan nodded, ignoring

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Mike's sudden bark of vicious amusement. There was still, he recalled, a score to be settled with Mike Smith. But not yet.

Under the great toppling heights of the machines they went, mountains of purple and rich deep blues and greens. Dead machines. But whatever air-conditioners had been installed unknown years ago were built for the ages, because the air was fresh here. Windless, but cool and clean. And the dimming lights shone down unchanging.

"What about you?" Karen was asking now. "The Alien—"

"I've met it," Alan said briefly.

Mike showed his teeth. "What is this Alien, Drake? Scotty's been talking about energy and vibration, but it doesn't make sense. The filthy thing can be killed, can't it?"

"God knows," Alan shrugged. "Not by bullets. It's afraid of sound, apparently, for whatever that's worth."

"But it can be killed!" The sentence was not a question. White dints showed in Mike's nostrils. The Nazi had courage, Alan knew for a certainty, but never before had that courage been tested against the unknown.

Mike's years of training with the German war machine had given him certain abilities, but it had destroyed certain others. Nazi soldiers fought to the death because they believed they were the master race, the *herrenvolken*. It all seemed trivial now, and incredibly long ago, but in this one application it was not trivial. For Mike had the weakness and the strength of his kind. When the German supreme confidence is undermined—that fanatical, unswerving belief in one's self—the psychological reaction is violent. And Mike Smith, brave as he undoubtedly was, had for weeks been facing a power against which he was completely helpless.

Over his shoulder Sir Colin said brusquely, "The Alien's not a devil. It's alive, and it has adaptability—to some extent. Without perfect adaptability it's vulnerable."

"To what?" Karen murmured.

"Metabolism, for one thing. Without food it willna live."

"Comforting!" Karen said. "When you think that we're the food it wants!"

Alan saw Mike Smith shudder.

"HUNGRY?" Sir Colin asked as they came into the huddle of the Terasi village under the out-curve of the cavern wall.

"Why, yes. I am. Thirsty, too." Alan felt surprise as he realized it. In Carcasilla the fountain had been both food and drink, but here he was mortal, it seemed. And he was not only hungry, he was famishing. And very tired. That fight with the Alien had been more draining than he had realized until now that comparative safety was reached. He was scarcely aware of the rude streets they were walking, or of the ragged Terasi who passed with curious stares, or of the great gongs hanging at intervals along the way, manned by grim-faced watchers.

Weariness and hunger made the whole cavern swim before him as reaction set in. He knew that Sir Colin was helping him into some rough-walled house, its roof only a network of pale-branched trellis. He heard Mike and Karen from far away. Someone put a spongy bread-like object in his hands and he tore at it ravenously, remembering the Alien's hunger with a wry sympathy now as he ate the mushroomy thing in his hand.

It helped a little. Sir Colin poured water into a metal cup and handed it to him, smiling. "There's no whuskey," he said gravely, "which probably accounts for the downfall of mankind."

The water was sweet and good, but food and drink were not all his wants now. He felt drained dry of energy by that terrible bout with the Alien. And he knew—he sensed unerringly that the Alien was not yet finished with him. He could feel it in the back of his mind as he ate and drank. Somewhere it was waiting, watching. . . .

"Sleep now," Sir Colin urged from somewhere outside the closed circle of his weariness. "We'll wake you if anything happens."

He did not even know when gentle hands led him to the bed.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Terasi Chieftain

A DEEP, resonant vibration, shivering through the room wakened Alan. He lay there staring, uncertain where he

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was. The sound came again as he lay blinking, and this time he recognized it and sat up abruptly, lifting one hand to his stubbly cheek. The beard was beginning to grow again, as it had never grown in Carcasilla. But he had no time to wonder over that, for the gong was ringing desperately now and the whole cavern seemed to resound with that ominous sound.

Alan was halfway to the door when Sir Colin came in, grinning.

"False alarm—we hope," he said, and cocked his head to listen. The gonging vibrations died slowly outside. "How d'ye feel this morning, laddie?"

"Better—all right. But that gong—"

"A sentry thought he saw the Light-Wearer shimmering in one of the crevices. That was all. He started an alarm, and the others are watching. Ye'll know soon enough if the thing's really there. D'ye feel like meeting Brekkir this morning?"

"Brekkir?" Alan echoed. "The leader, eh? Sure, bring him in. Is it really morning?"

Sir Colin laughed again. "How can I tell? They measure time differently here. Brekkir's waiting outside. I'll call him."

He stepped to the door and lifted his voice. A moment later Karen and Mike came in, nodding briefly to Alan's greeting. Behind them a great ragged figure entered. The same tattered savage, magnificent as an auroch in his breadth of shoulder and tremendous depth of chest, who had come charging up Flande's spiral waterfall with terror and determination on his hideously scarred face. The same shouting barbarian whom Alan had last seen above him, driving his heels down crushingly into Alan's ribs.

A glint of sardonic humor gleamed in the man's deeply recessed eyes. Alan braced himself warily as the Terasi came forward and put his great hands on the other's shoulders, stood back at arm's length to scrutinize Alan with a look of wonder growing on his harsh face. He said something to Sir Colin in a deep-chested guttural.

The Scotsman answered, nodding toward Alan. When he had finished, "Brekkir wonders at your recuperative powers," he translated. "He says he gave you mortal wounds."

"I'd have died, all right," Alan said grimly. "It was the fountain that saved me."

Sir Colin gave Brekkir the words in his own tongue. The Terasi's shaggy brows lifted. He pushed aside Alan's shirt and ran calloused fingers along the healed scars that banded his torso. Excitement shook his voice when he spoke again.

The Scotsman answered, and he too was excited.

Karen broke in to ask, "A power-source? What does he mean?"

"I'm not sure. But this is something I hadn't expected, though I should have guessed from what Alan's been saying. If Brekkir's right, we may have the answer to all our problems. Though it seems incredible!"

Alan stared. "What is it?"

"I'd best show you on the scanners. There's so much to explain. Look—Karen's brought your breakfast. Eat it while Brekkir and I talk."

Alan let himself be pushed down to a seat before a makeshift table of plastic blocks, and Karen set more of the mushroom-bread before him, and a cup of water. She was watching Brekkir's scarred face, bright with a sort of triumph, as he argued vehemently against Sir Colin's cool questions. Mike watched too, though obviously the flurry of quick discussion was a little beyond him. Strange, thought Alan, how little they had changed in these weeks apart.

But it was not wise to think, somehow. For so long he had been half-asleep, his mind dulled, living in the incarnate dream that was Carcasilla. His thoughts felt strange now. It was difficult to believe in the reality of anything that had happened. The act of independent thinking was like resuming the use of a paralyzed limb. His brain did not feel entirely the brain of Alan Drake.

He had the curious illusion of seeing through the wrong end of a telescope. Brekkir was a tiny figure gesticulating to a microscopic Sir Colin. He saw them with objective coldness, as if they were beings of a different species.

DEEP in his mind a furtive, cold horror stirred. But far down, smothered under clouds of lassitude, Alan's aware-

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ness of *himself* faded. His own body seemed alien, no part of his consciousness. And a slow desire was rising in him that had no kinship with human passions. It was in his mind, tiny and far away, and then leaping forward with great striding bounds, as the Light-Wearer had come from the Way of the Gods.

It was hunger he felt, that deep and terrible desire—ravenous hunger for—what? Hunger, and beyond it a desperate solitude. He was alone. He was wandering in some formless place, searching amid great ruins that breathed out desolation. And the hunger grew and grew.

Small beings of ambiguous outlines flashed into view. He clutched at them, and they vanished. He could not see clearly. A shimmering glow veiled all that distorted world around him. Sometimes he glimpsed it more clearly, and a sick pain shook him. He must not see clearly! The veil of light shielded him from a world so monstrously alien that he could not, for sanity's sake, look at it openly.

Look? He sensed; he did not see. Every cell was an eye, gathering all sensation from every direction. Through him a pulsing beat rocked in intermittent rhythm. Shockingly, he realized the completeness of his change. It had come imperceptibly, but now he knew that the thing that was alien to him was—Alan Drake. The body of Alan Drake, and all his basic humanity. He was no longer human. The word *human* meant *alien*.

He heard Sir Colin's voice faintly; the sound was unpleasant. It grated on his senses. He struggled against the grip of strong hands whose touch was hateful.

"Alan! For God's sake, laddie, wake up!"

But he was awake—for the first time. This creature was trying to stop him from returning to Carcasilla. That was it! He must go back! Only there could he find appeasement for this dreadful hunger that burned him. He must go back to the Light-Wearer, open his mind—but no, he *was* the Light-Wearer; Alan Drake was the willing sacrifice.

"Karen! Help me! Mike—" It was Sir Colin's voice, calling from far away. Alan saw as if through a diminishing-lens—as a god might look at a distant world—Sir Colin struggling with Brekkir, desperately holding back the bull-muscled chief, saw the horror and loathing and fury on the Terasi's face as he lunged toward Alan. And he saw murder there.

"Karen!" the burring, alien voice called again, tiny and distant. "Mike, help me hold him! He'll kill—"

And Mike Smith's strained voice, "Let him! Let him go! The Alien's here—I can feel it! Those gongs were right. It's come, it's here in this room!"

Then Karen's swift steps racing across the floor and her hard, small fist cracking savagely against Alan's jaw. Blaze of pain; flashing lights. Then a timeless eternity of groping, a frantic striving for orientation. . . The world steadied. Sick and weak from reaction, Alan saw an altered world—a normal-sized Sir Colin flung aside by a towering Brekkir who charged forward with shoulders hunched, eyes hot and deadly.

It was instinct that showed Alan the gun at Karen's belt. He was not yet wholly back in his own mind, perhaps, but his body thought for him. The metal was cold against his palm. He swung the pistol up unwaveringly at Brekkir while the room lurched around him, knowing only that if he revealed weakness now he was gone.

"Hold it!" he snapped, hearing his own cold voice still a little alien to his ears. But he was himself now. The possessor was gone. And it must have shown on his face and in his impassive eyes under the full lids, for Brekkir paused, reading danger in the voice he could not understand. A second of indecision, and then

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Brekkir shook himself and stepped back, his breath coming in heavy, uneven gusts.

"All right, Karen?" Alan asked without looking at her. "Will he—"

"I don't know. Sir Colin's the only one who can handle him. Whatever happened, it was bad."

Mike Smith licked dry lips. "It was the Alien. He was *here*. He was *you*."

Sir Colin got painfully to his feet, came forward to put an arm about Brekkir's great shoulders. The Terasi muttered, shaken. Sir Colin answered briefly.

"Gie me yer gun, Alan. He doesna trust you. It's all right now, but gie me the gun."

Alan laid it in his outstretched hand, hesitating a little. Brekkir seemed relieved, but his smouldering eyes still brooded upon the other. Sir Colin said,

"All right now, laddie? Ah-h. But—God, mon! What happened? Ye were—were—"

Alan sat down heavily. "I'm all right now. But I could stand a drink."

"Hold hard." Sir Colin's grip steadied his shoulder. "Let me see your eyes. Yet . . . But for awhile they were all pupil. Black as the mouth of Hell! I'll admit, ye've shaken me. But I think I know the answer."

"You do?" Alan moistened his lips. "Then tell me."

"It was the Alien, laddie. Ye are verra, verra sensitive to that creature. Like a bit of iron sensitized by a magnet. It may pass. I trust it will."

Alan pressed his palms against aching eyes. "It's like being possessed of a devil."

"It is that! Ye maun fight it, then. If it can control ye from a distance—yet ye fought the thing in Carcasilla."

"I hope to God it never happens again," Alan said in a shaken voice. "The worst part was that I—I liked it. I lost all sense of personal identity." His teeth showed in a furious grin. "I—let's not talk about it just now."

Sir Colin glanced at him sharply for a moment, then seemed satisfied. "Aye, but Brekkir—"

At the sound of his name the Terasi glowered and muttered something. Sir Colin nibbled his lower lip. "Brekkir fears ye, laddie. Or rather fears your falling under the Alien's control. It's like having a spy from the enemy in your camp. Ye'd better stick close to me. I've promised Brekkir I'll keep my eye on ye."

Alan was too heartsick to reply. He could still feel the dreadful flood of alienage that had possessed him, and he was thinking of Evaya experiencing that dark power over mind and soul.

A voice shouted from outside. Brekkir listened, then grunted to Sir Colin and hurried out. The Scotsman grunted in turn. "Come along, all of ye. Trouble, as usual. And a good thing for you, Alan; it'll give Brekkir something else to think about!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

Battle of the Gongs

THEY hurried through the Terasi village, where ragged savages shrank away from Alan with loathing in their eyes. Evidently rumor had run fast through the town. But the gongs were not booming now, which was one small comfort. The Alien had withdrawn—for a time, and for its own purposes. They were to know in a moment what those purposes were.

Sir Colin led them, at Brekkir's heels, around the base of a vast leaning tower of deep-green plastic and in through a sloping door in its base. Spiral stairs rose steeply. They were all dizzy with the rapid turns before they came out into a domed room high above the cavern floor. A sort of frieze ran about the circular wall, head-high, divided into foot-long rectangles of cloudy glass. Beneath each were several wheels like safe-dials. Most of the screens bore decorative designs, but the one before which Brekkir stopped showed a picture.

A picture of Evaya!

Alan pushed closer, staring. He seemed to be looking down upon the scene, and from one side. The screen was full of motion now—full of the men and women of Carcasilla, streaming along the Way of the Gods, their faces glowing with fanatical exultation. And Evaya walked before them, her lovely pale hair drifting upon the air-currents, her face blank with the blankness of her possession.

"A television plate in the passage," Sir

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Colin's precise explanation came. "This is the scanner room, Alan. It connects with thousands of viewers scattered through the caverns, many of them not working any more, of course. Watch."

Brekkir spun a dial; a new scene showed —the Way of the Gods, bare and empty. Far away along it motion stirred. The swirl of gossamer robes, pale faces crowding. And then—striding with great swooping bounds, robed in darkness and in light, in fire and cloud—came the shape that no eyes could clearly see. Leading the Carcasillians strode their god, the Light-Wearer.

A shock of dismay shook Alan. He felt Brekkir's shoulder beside his heave convulsively. Mike Smith made a hoarse, wordless sound deep in his throat.

"Logical," Sir Colin said quietly, as though he were lecturing at Edinburgh. "I should have foreseen this. They have no weapons yet, but I don't doubt *It* knows where to find weapons."

"What are you talking about?" Mike snapped. "Is it coming here?"

"Certainly. Where else? It wants food, and we are its food, not the Carcasillians. It can't pass our sonic protection alone, so it calls in the Carcasillians as an attacking force, to silence our gongs if they can. After that. . . "

Brekkir barked an order over his shoulder. One of the Terasi in the room went out swiftly. Brekkir pulled at his beard and eyed Sir Colin. The Scotsman grunted.

"Less than a hundred Terasi, but the women can fight too. The Carcasillians—how many, Alan?"

"Several hundred, I'd guess."

"They'll be no match for us, alone. But depend on it, they'll have some sort of weapons when they get here."

Alan turned his mind from the sickening picture of the delicate doll-army from Carcasila falling beneath the bludgeons of the Terasi. But he knew he could not protest. The Terasi were right. Even Evaya's blown-glass loveliness was a vessel for the Alien now—a vessel to be shattered.

He would not think of it.

"Aye, they'll have weapons from somewhere," Sir Colin was muttering thoughtfully. "Well, our gongs are strong, but I wish—if we only had a power-source! We wouldn't depend on hand-gongs then."

"Why not?" asked Alan. "Are there other weapons here you know about?"

"Are ye forgetting the men who built this cavern died fighting the Light-Wearers? D'ye think they wouldn't have left weapons behind? Maybe more than we know of. But there's one great gong alone, in one of the machines, that would do the work of a thousand hand-gongs, if we had the power."

Brekkir grunted something behind him, and Sir Colin nodded.

"Forget that now. Tell me about the fountain, laddie. All you remember. It's important."

"There isn't much to tell." Alan frowned, remembering.

"It's still alive? Still powerful?"

"Well, it healed me. And it gives the Carcasillians immortality."

Sir Colin spoke to Brekkir, who fumbled with the dials.

"Here's the story, laddie. Listen now, it's important. Forget the Carcasillians while ye can. It may be we've got the solution right here in our hands—if we live through the next few hours. This rebel race that lived here in the cavern was a sort of maintenance crew for the Way of the Gods. It kept the worlds alive along it. So we have these scanners and other things. It's a library, too. There are visual historical records. I'll show you, presently. Mind you, this is important. Because the Aliens told their slave-race how to maintain the underground worlds. Gave them too much knowledge, perhaps, for they never expected revolt. And when the revolt came, the slaves died, as I told ye. But the records remain. Look."

UNDER Brekkir's blunt fingers a picture flashed upon the screen. Alan watched with less than half his mind. He could see only the Carcasillians, blind and helpless and deadly dangerous, marching on the Terasi.

But as the pictures changed on the screen he found himself watching involuntarily. The world's surface, smooth and lifeless, slid past in panorama. He saw gigantic ruins, like nothing man's world had ever known. He saw death and desolation everywhere.

Once he caught a glimpse of the great,

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abnormal asymmetries of the citadel lifting against a misty sky, and curiosity suddenly burned in his mind about what lay inside it, but he knew he would never learn that now.

And once he saw the flash of a deep gorge, bottomless, vertiginous, its far side hidden in fog. And far away along it a moving white wall that drew nearer. Alan thought of a flood bursting down a dry arroyo. But this chasm was immeasurably vast, and the flood was deluge. Prismatic rainbows veiled it. Boiling, crashing, seething like a hundred Niagaras, the mighty tide swept toward them, brimming the chasm.

Alan felt a faint tremble shake the floor. Sir Colin nodded.

"The sea-bed—what's left of it. The moon's verra close now, and its drag is tremendous. In a million years, it's cut a gorge across the planet. This is all that remains of the ocean. It follows the moon around the earth."

"That thunder we heard when we first left the ship," Alan remembered. "That was it?"

"Aye. Watch."

Vision after vision shifted across the screen. Desolation, ruin. And yet there was life. Gigantic worm-shapes slid through the mists, and once one of the flying half-human things drifted down the slopes of air above the tidal chasm.

"No intelligence," Sir Colin murmured, pointing. "They follow the water and eat weeds and fish. They are no longer human."

More scenes changing on the screen. Gray dust, gray death. . . And then, unexpectedly, a forest—green, lovely, veiled in silvery fog. A shallow pool where a fish rose in a ring of widening ripples. A small brown animal raced out of the underbrush and fled beyond the scanner's range.

Alan leaned forward, suddenly sick with a passion of longing for the past he would never see again. Green earth, lost springtime of the world! He could not speak for a moment.

"It is the past," Sir Colin said gravely. "A part of history, but a history we never saw. Perhaps a thousand years ago, perhaps more. It is the planet Venus."

"The Aliens went there?"

"Aye. But they didna stay. No human life to feed them. They came back to earth and died here. But do ye na see it, Alan—Venus is habitable! Humans could live there!"

"A thousand years ago—"

"Or more—nothing in the life of a planet. We have records of the atmosphere on Venus, the elements, the water and food. Humans can live there, I tell ye, laddie! And now, perhaps will!" He

(Please turn to page 124)

Sports of the Old World

3. Archery

IF government sponsorship could determine how a nation should spend its hours of recreation, archery would still be the most popular sport in England. For centuries monarchs and legislators enacted laws encouraging proficiency in the use of bow and arrow, even to the extent of requiring the practice of archery on Sundays and holidays and prohibiting other forms of recreation on pain of imprisonment. The reason, of course, was that the bow was a weapon of war—and a very important one. Its origin as such is lost in obscurity. Egyptians, Greeks, Romans had all shaped their history with its aid.

Skill in its use was considered a princely accomplishment. Few could bend the bow that William the Conqueror used. He saw to it that his arches were the finest on the continent, and his victory at Hastings was unquestionably due to their skill. A century and a quarter later Richard the Lion Hearted, with 300 archers and 17 knights, stopped the charge of the whole Turkish and Saracen army. With such shining evidence of the might of bow and arrow, it is little wonder that subsequent rulers tried to make England a nation of archers.

There were shooting butts—mounds for the targets—in every township, and royal edicts not only decreed that every inhabitant should practise on holidays but determined the cost, style and length of his bow.

For two centuries after the invention of firearms, the bow was still used by English soldiers, principally because of the time it took to reload a musket, and it was not till the end of the 17th Century that archery ceased to be a required sport.

Today it is a fifth-magnitude recreation. Perhaps that is a commentary on the perversity of human nature, for people don't like to be told how to spend their hours of play.

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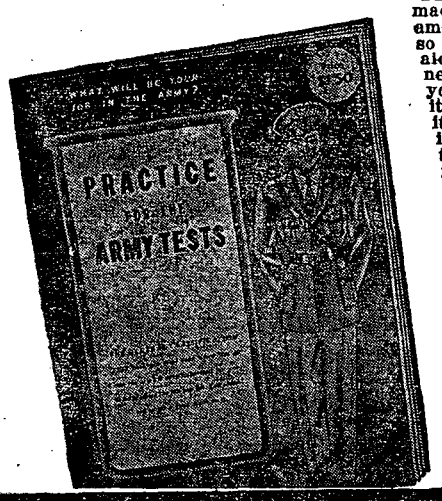

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(Continued from page 122)

lifted bony shoulders. "If what we hope is true. And if we live to prove it."

"What?"

It was Karen who answered.

"The Aliens destroyed their spaceships, toward the end. Used up the metal for some other purpose, maybe, or maybe for the energy in them. For a long time the Terasi have known they could live on Venus if they had a ship and a power-source. Now there's a ship. The one that brought us here."

"Well?"

"Well, the ship's big enough to carry us all—Terasi too, I think. We could go to Venus and rebuild the race on a new world. *If* we had any power."

"It is a second chance for mankind," Sir Colin said gravely. "But—no power. No power in all the world. The Terasi checked that long ago. Only little scraps like those that keep these scanners going. Till I saw you, Alan, I had no idea that there might be a power-source left on earth."

"The fountain!" Alan said.

"Aye. The Terasi knew no Carcasillians until you came. They never guessed about the fountain. But there it is, and there must be a source to keep it burning. Enough to take a ship to Venus! That I know." Sir Colin struck a gnarled fist into his palm. "I have searched and studied here, and I'd stake my soul on that. If we could only take it out—power the ship with it!"

"What is the source?"

"I dinna quite know. Radioactivity, perhaps, yet something more. The Aliens brought it with them from the stars, and it's a strange stuff. I know a little from charts the robot-humans left here. A glowing little nucleus that consumes itself slowly and sends out radiations. Will ye bet there isn't one of them under that fountain in Carcasilla?" His voice shook as he spoke.

"That fountain—the Carcasillians live by it," Alan reminded him slowly.

"Aye, a sterile life. They'll never rebuild civilization. But the Terasi now—they're strong enough to face hardships on the new world. And they have fine

(Please turn to page 126)

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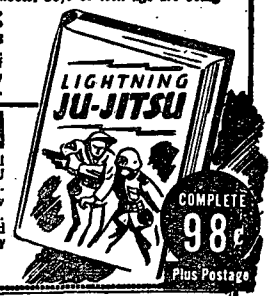

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(Continued from page 124)

minds. If we could get back to Carcasilla—we canna be sentimental about this, Alan, laddie. That may be the last power-source on earth, and we maun use it to save mankind."

ALAN nodded without speaking. Yes, they must take it if they could. There was nothing the Carcasillians could do to prevent them. All over the city, that violet light dying, the fountain of life fading, the delicate folk who were made for toys tasting mortality at last—hunger and thirst and death. The bubble city shivering in the cold winds from outside, its floating castles shattered, its colors dimmed. And Evaya in the gathering shadows—*Evaya, with her eyes blank mirrors through which the Light-Wearer stared!*

Alan said harshly, "All right. What's the plan?"

It was Karen who laughed. "The plan? Why, keep the gongs going while we can, until the Alien breaks through and gets us." Her voice was brittle.

Sir Colin said evenly, as if she had not spoken, "The plan would be to get back into Carcasilla, I suppose—now, while the people are gone—and try to find what lies beneath the fountain and see if we can use it."

Alan said suddenly, "Flande! Flande won't be gone! Flande's no fragile toy for the Light-Wearer to command. And the Carcasillians aren't quite as helpless as we thought, not while Flande's alive. He'll prevent our taking away the power source, if only for his own safety!"

"Aye, Flande," Sir Colin said heavily. "I'd forgotten him. Flande's a force I haven't reckoned with. He's too enigmatic to fit in anywhere until we know who he is, or what. But Karen's right, laddie." The big shoulders of the older man sagged a little.

"We've got another problem here and now," he said then. He nodded toward the screen upon which the flutter of gossamer garments was passing. "They must be nearly here. The Alien's making his last bid, you know. He'll have something—"

The brazen note of a gong thundered

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out from the cavern below them, cutting off his words. The echoes spread shuddering through the whole great space of the cave, and another gong answered them, deeper-toned, vibrating. And then another. A diapason of quivering metal, like the striking of shields, rose and bellowed and rent the air within the cavern with a mighty crashing.

Mike's hand went to his gun. "This is it."

Brekkir sprang to the stairway. They followed him dizzily upward, around and around, until the sloping roof opened before them. Far below lay the machine-city and the cavern floor.

The deafening vibrations of beaten metal roared out, echoing and re-echoing from the walls and the arched roof. Around them, on roof-tops, in the streets, knots of Terasi were gathered about heavy plates that gleamed like brass. Crude sledges swung and crashed with resounding force against the gongs.

Booming, roaring, bellowing, the Terasi thundered their defiance to the last of the living gods.

Brekkir pointed. In the cracks that split the cavern walls figures stirred. Pale figures, gossamer-robed. The Carcasillians, clambering like hundreds of ants above them.

Mike jerked out his pistol and fired, but Karen struck down his arm.

"Hold it! Save 'em, Mike. We haven't got too much ammunition."

Mike looked at her, paling. Karen shrugged. Then she looked up quickly as a thin lance of light shot down from the distant cavern wall. It touched a platform nearby, where Terasi were swinging their measured blows heavily against a bronze plate.

The Terasi jumped aside, startled. But the ray did not seem to harm them. It went through their bodies like x-rays made visible. But on the surface of the metal it exploded in white fire. Broke there, and crawled, like a stain.

The Terasi lifted their hammers again and struck savagely. No vibrating thunder followed the blows. The gong clanked dully, like struck lead.

Sir Colin grimaced. "Heat-rays that don't harm living organisms."

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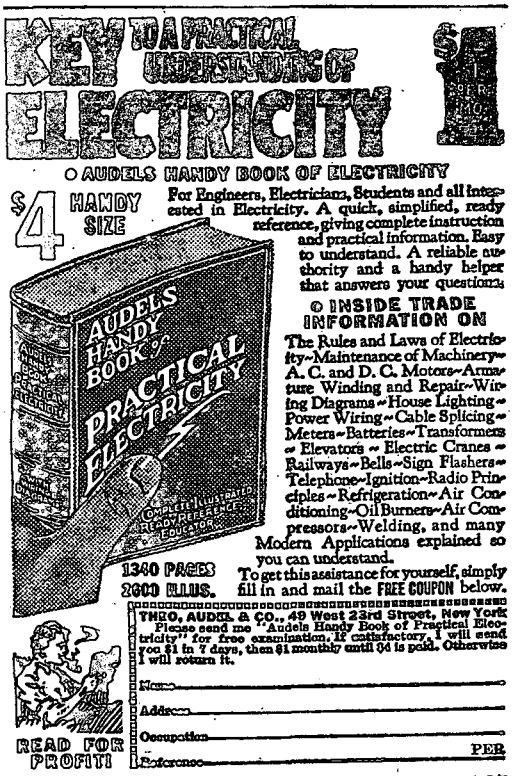
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"What is it?" Karen asked.

"After a bell's been heated in a furnace, it won't vibrate. Same principle, I think. The Carcasillians can silence every gong here with those. See, there goes another. Now where the Alien found such weapons I'd give a lot to know."

"You won't know," Mike told him, with a faint echo of hysteria in his voice. "We'll never know. Look—another gong has gone!"

The worst thing, thought Alan, was the fact that the heat-rays did not harm human flesh. The Alien was saving his humans alive.

"And we can't *do* anything!" raged Karen, striking the rail before her with both hands. "We've even got to save our ammunition for the noise—or for each other."

Brekkir grunted to Sir Colin and then leaned across the roof-top, waving an arm and shouting above the thunder of the gongs. Among the machines below, Terasi carrying dull-shining metal bows began to climb up here and there, balancing and bracing themselves in the angles of the great toppling machines. Steel arrows began to flash toward the cracks in the walls where the swarming multitude of figures moved.

"We can do a little, it seems," Sir Colin said. "Not much, but some."

THE delicately colored carriers of doom were creeping closer now, ignoring the Terasi arrows. Now and then Alan saw one find its mark and a gossamer-robed denizen of the city that never knew death fell silently among the rocks. But the Carcasillians crept on, and long fingers of light went probing out before them, seeking and silencing the gongs. That tremendous swelling bellow of sound still rioted through the cavern, but just perceptibly it was lessening now. One gong, or two or three, made no real difference that could be measured. But the toll inevitably was mounting.

Helplessly Alan watched the fragile army advance. How incongruous it seemed, that these doll-like creatures could bring doom upon the savage Terasi, creeping down the walls in their floating garments, firing as they came. Evaya would

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be somewhere among them, fragile and lovely and blind. Unless an arrow had found her already. . .

(It had been like holding life itself in his arms, to hold that resilient, steel-spring body, so delicate and so strong. He had been near to forgetting that latent strength in her, which would never matter to him now. He thought of the dizzy moment of their kiss, while the bubble city rocked below them. He must forget it now and forever—for whatever time in eternity remained.)

And he knew that this way of dying was perhaps as good as any, and easier than some. For now he would not have to watch Carcasilla shattered and ruined and dark.

Also, he knew, suddenly as he heard the gongs falling silent one by one below him, that he would never have left Evaya in a dying Carcasilla while the Terasi set sail for the future, even if Flande had let them rob the fountain of its power. He knew he would have gone back to the ruined city and taken that fragile, resilient body in his arms and held her, waiting while the darkness closed around them both.

In the end, he knew now, they must have died together, one way or another. This was quicker and so perhaps it was easier.

He looked up and saw a pale shimmer far back in a chasm of the walls, and a hard shudder of revulsion shook him. Easier? Easier to die in the Light-Wearer's terrible embrace?

He watched it, fascinated, glimmering far back in the darkness, waiting and urging its puppets on.

The pale light lanced down from all around them. And the cavern was no longer bellowing with shaking sound. Here on the roof-top they had no need to shout to one another any more. Alan saw Karen take a firmer grip upon her gun, saw her shoulders square beneath the ragged blouse.

"Well, it won't be long now," she said grimly. "This is it, boys. Too bad—I'd have liked to see Venus."

(To Be Concluded in the Next Issue)

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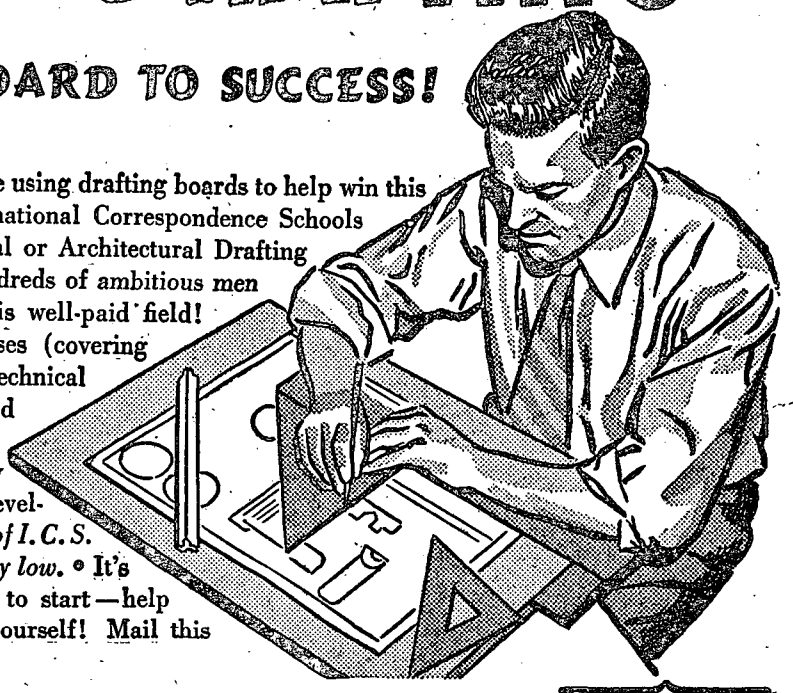

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(Continued from other side)

any one of his victims up—as they'll be cutting *me* in the next half hour—and you'll find nothing. And by the way, Mr. Colt—*YOU are on his list!*"

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